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ABSTRACT

Two pastoral priorities that today's catechetical leaders place toward the top of their agenda are assessment and integration. Each priority has a rich fullness, grounded in the church's contemporary catechetical documents. This book tells the story of what youths know about their faith and how they put their faith into action. The chapter titles include the following: (1) "The Key Catechetical Principles Pertaining to Assessment"; (2) "Methodology for the Study"; (3) "Students' Religious Knowledge"; (4) "Students' Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Perceptions"; (5) "Relationships are Central to Religious Value Development"; (6) "Predictors of Religious Knowledge and Religious Practice"; (7) "Summary and Conclusions." (LB)

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Weaving Christ's Seamless Garment

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Andrew D. Thompson, Ph.D.

National Catholic Educational Association

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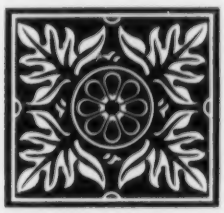

Weaving Christ's Seamless Garment

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Preface

ASSESSMENT OF CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Weaving Christ's Seamless Garment

The full title of this book calls attention to two pastoral priorities which today's catechetical leaders place toward the top of their agenda: assessment and integration. Each priority has a rich fullness, grounded in the church's contemporary catechetical documents. Both require considerable explanation. Briefly put, "assessment" refers to the identification of youths' religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and perceptions about their faith. "Integration" refers to how the youths weave these religious elements together into the fabric of their daily lives.

The following chapters tell the story not only of *what* youths know about their faith, but of *how* they put their faith into action.

Assessing Catechesis: ACRE

The first priority is assessment, something every catechist, pastor and parent knows needs to be done on a regular basis. Assessment serves as a "reality check" which helps to evaluate the students' progress. Familiar examples are tests administered at the end of a text's chapter or a religion program's semester.

As used in this National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) report, however, assessment has a much broader meaning. It identifies the extent of the students' religious knowledge, beliefs, perceptions and practices in carefully selected content areas singled out by the church's catechetical directives. These content areas are defined and discussed, in Chapter 2.

Many readers are familiar with the acronym ACRE, which stands for Assessment of Catholic Religious Education. This is the name of the three NCEA survey instruments widely used for helping Catholic schools and parishes assess their religion programs. The surveys are geared for senior high, junior high and the middle years of fifth/sixth grades, titled, respectively, ACRE level 3, 2 and 1. Hereafter they are referred to as ACRE3, ACRE2 or ACRE1. Each year hundreds of schools and parishes administer the ACRE surveys to help assess the extent to which their religious education programs are achieving their objectives.

This book is the NCEA's report to these catechetical leaders who administer ACRE, and to all who are interested in assessment of parish and school religious education programs. It presents the highlights of an analysis of the students' responses to the ACRE surveys during the 1994-95 academic year. It also reports on the technical properties of the ACRE surveys, including their reliability and validity, which are of special interest to educational researchers.

The broader catechetical community has shown strong interest in these findings and in the pastoral implications of the students' responses. The findings reported here show considerable continuity with an earlier NCEA study reported in 1982. They indicate similar strengths and weaknesses of youths' religious knowledge, attitudes and practices. Because of this continuity, the authors believe the findings presented here have a pastoral usefulness which is not diminished by the fact that the data was gathered during the 1994-95 academic year.

Integrating Catechesis

In addition to presenting solid information about where youths are with regard to four religious areas — what youths know, believe, perceive and do — this book also explains new insights from a statistical analysis of how these areas interface with one another. This is the second priority of catechetical leaders who are deeply concerned about how youths integrate their religious knowledge into their daily lives. For example, these leaders want to know: Are youths who know about their

faith more likely to engage in prayer and reception of the sacraments? Are youths who care about their Catholic identity more likely to know and practice their faith? To what extent is the youth's personal closeness to Christ associated with closeness to family and parish and vice versa? The answers to these types of questions take catechists to a deeper level and provide them with a window for viewing how youths are integrating faith into their lives.

The main title of this book, "Weaving Christ's Seamless Garment," calls attention to this desire to bring together and coordinate the various elements of the catechetical message and of the community so they contribute effectively to the goals of religious education. The phrase "Weaving Christ's Seamless Garment" is intended to suggest that the sharing of religious values is an ongoing process, a weaving. The findings presented in this report are not the end of the story but, rather, a snapshot of youths as they progress toward the goal of religious maturity.

This title also acknowledges that Christ is the central focus of all catechesis. The image of Christ's seamless garment comes from John's gospel, which describes how, when Jesus was crucified, the soldiers divided his clothing among them. But they had difficulty dividing his garment for it was "seamless, woven in one piece from neck to hem" (Jn 19:23).

This NCEA research report extends this Gospel's imagery to apply to the church's catechetical efforts to share Christ's teaching in a way which, like Christ's garment, highlights its integrity. This image has significance well beyond any attempt to teach young children the complete syllabus of Catholic doctrines. Rather, the seamless garment can be likened to the very fabric of the church itself where, as Jesus' disciples, as individuals and as a community, Catholics strive to make their lives closely interwoven, without breaks. One of the most important findings presented below indicates that this Christ-centeredness is a reality in many youths' lives and not simply a theoretical catechetical principle.

Lastly, the phrase "seamless garment" points to the commitment that today's catechetical leaders have to making sure the elements of the religious education process fit together into a meaningful whole. This commitment requires that catechetical programs present the story of Christ in its entirety rather than in fragmented pieces. Beyond this concern that the catechetical content makes sense and captures students' imagination, catechetical leaders hope that the students integrate their

religious knowledge, beliefs, perceptions and behavior into a meaningful whole. So this second priority, integration, calls attention to the importance of what students are saying about their relationships with Jesus, with their parish, friends and family.

With God's grace, all the members of the Christian community will be active contributors to this process of nurturing the students' faith and weaving them into the church community.

Readers are encouraged to keep in mind these two priorities, assessment and integration, as they evaluate the following findings with a view to their implications for their own parish or school religion program. The findings include not only the extent of the students' religious information, but also the fuller aspects of their gradual spiritual formation, including their moral judgments, religious behavior, and their relationships with Jesus, the church, the parish and family members.

Because these findings present a snapshot of students' religious knowledge, beliefs and practices at a particular point in time, readers need to keep in mind that the students are "works in progress." As expected, given the ages of the students, the integration and integrity of Christ's Gospel has yet to take complete hold in many students' minds, hearts and actions. The weaving will continue throughout the students' entire lives, in their homes and parishes and in the broader community as well.

The statistical analyses reported herein show linkages between students' religious beliefs and their daily practices. These findings make an important contribution to the discussion which, as explained in Chapter 1, Pope John Paul II has urged, namely, that catechetical leaders assess and evaluate how students are accepting the Gospel "in thought and in life."

The findings which follow suggest ways that catechists, pastors and parents, together, can accomplish these two priorities: assessment of youths' religious knowledge, beliefs, perceptions and practices, as well as integration of these elements into their lives.

Acknowledgments

On behalf of the NCEA, I am thankful to our members for the support and encouragement that they have given to this project over the past four years. In 1982, with the publication of *That They May Know You...* by Dr. Andrew Thompson, Ph.D. and Fr. Paul Philibert, the Association and the entire country received valuable information on the religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and perceptions of students enrolled in Catholic schools and parish-based religious education programs from NCEA's religious education assessment surveys: REDI, REOI and REKAP. In discussing this initial research in 1994, the diocesan leaders involved with the National Conference of Diocesan Directors of Religious Education(NCDRE) and the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education (CACE) suggested that new research begin on the data managed by the department of religious education in NCEA's surveys now known as the Assessment of Catholic Religious Education(ACRE).

In selecting persons who bring expertise in research, testing and religious education, we did not have to look far! Dr. Andrew Thompson, co-author of the first publication, and Dr. John Convey, Provost at The Catholic University of America, both have a long history of work and

collaboration on research projects with the Association. Furthermore, they had just completed a revision of the Information for Growth (IFG) tool on adult faith assessment for the department. Although personally I had not previously worked with them on a project, I learned quickly of their enthusiasm and commitment to the task ahead of them. They both are deeply committed to the Church and its important ministry of evangelization and catechesis.

As with any project of this magnitude, it represents the work and contributions of many people. On behalf of the entire association, I thank and commend Dr. Andrew Thompson and Dr. John Convey for their expertise, dedication and humor throughout this project. They prepared a text that is appealing and practical for religious educators and statistically rich for the serious researcher. In the early part of this study, Steve Rosera and Mimi Wu played an important role in compiling and preparing the results of the 1994-95 ACRE data. Throughout this project, the religious education and Catholic school divisions of CACE and its executive directors, Frank Savage, Sr. Lourdes Sheehan and Dan Curtin, have given wonderful support and encouragement. In the later stages of the project, Steve Palmer and Diana Dudoit Raiche, my colleagues in the department of religious education, worked almost daily on the project, making edits and serving as the communication link between the authors and the NCEA staff. The graphic, production and marketing staff at the association, Beatriz Ruiz and Phyllis Kokus, deserve high praise for the production and marketing of this text. Also, from the very outset of this project the Knights of Columbus through its Michael J. McGivney Fund gave generous monetary support for this project.

In closing, I sincerely hope that this publication will offer new insights and affirmation for all who are involved in the important ministries of evangelization and catechesis.

Robert Colbert
Executive Director
Department of Religious Education

About the Authors

John J. Convey, Ph.D., has authored or edited five books pertaining to Catholic education, including *Catholic Schools Make a Difference: Twenty-five Years of Research* (1992). He has assisted nine dioceses with the strategic planning for and restructuring of their school system. He was the 1991 recipient of the C. Albert Koob Award, given by the NCEA for outstanding national service to Catholic schools. Dr. Convey has experience in teaching religious education in high school and in parish programs. Currently he is Provost of The Catholic University of America, where, since 1974, he has taught statistics and is the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Professor of Education.

Andrew D. Thompson, Ph.D., authored the first NCEA religious education assessment report *That They May Know You*, published in 1982. At that time he was an associate professor of religious education and, for ten years, a researcher at The Catholic University of America. Earlier, Dr. Thompson was a full-time religion teacher in a Catholic high school and subsequently an editor and teacher-trainer with a Catholic catechetical publishing firm. He directed the 1992 revision of the ACRE survey instruments. Currently, he is the National Director of the St. Vincent Pallotti Centers which coordinate lay volunteer and missionary efforts.

CHAPTER ONE

The Key Catechetical Principles Pertaining to Assessment

Chapter Overview

The NCEA assessment instruments, the ACRE surveys, are firmly grounded in the church's catechetical documents. They embody an effort to be **faithful** to the content of Christ's Gospel message and to be **effective** in sharing it through parish and school catechetical programs. This Chapter identifies and discusses the major themes and principles of the church's catechetical documents, which have guided the construction and interpretation of the ACRE surveys. It also illustrates how the assessment of two principles, fidelity and effectiveness, have been built into the structure of the ACRE surveys. The church documents employ several key metaphors and terms, and ask catechists to combine the old with the new, to strive for continuity along with adaptation. These dual elements, however, explain and parallel the two priorities of today's catechists, first, the assessment of students' religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and perceptions, and second, the determination of the extent to which students integrate these elements into their daily lives.

Catechesis Strives to Be Faithful and Effective

Pope John Paul II, writing to the church's catechetical leadership, identified their task as:

> a constant effort to 'translate' this word (Christ's teachings), to make it accessible to all those for whom it is intended, so that, accepted in thought and in life, it can become the leaven of all cultures, giving life to Christian-inspired practices, morals and institutions.[1]

The richness of this statement invites a careful rereading. Catechesis is a process of translation such that Christ's word becomes accessible: not only intellectually, but for daily living; not only for the individual, but for all cultures; not only to inspire a passive awe, but to inspire active practices, morals and long-standing institutions.

This richness, in part, is due to the pontiff's careful use of several traditional metaphors. Catechesis, he states above, is a "translation." Central to every translation is that it be faithful and true to the original message, in this case, to Christ's Gospel story of redemption. This translation needs to be accessible to the person's mind but also to the heart and thereby able to influence the listener's behavior ("life"). Further, catechesis is a "leaven" which inspires permanent structural changes within a culture, in its morals and institutions.

In this single papal statement, we have two core priorities: implicitly, that catechesis needs to be faithful; explicitly, that it needs to be effective.

Catechesis Strives to Follow the Gospel and the Church's Directives

Christ addressed his good news to the very heart of each nation's culture. To his disciples he gave the mandate to proclaim his word "to all the nations" (Mt 28:19), a directive that goes well beyond geography and also extends beyond the simple conveying of religious knowledge. Clearly, his Gospel challenged the beliefs, values and the very way of living of communities and individuals alike.

At the beginning of the third millennium since Christ's coming, the church community strives to discover and be faithful to the integrity of this mystery of his Incarnation and redemptive mission. This integrity

requires that Christ's role as savior remains central to the catechetical message. At the same time, the church continues to gain insight into its own role and responsibilities on behalf of this mystery.

For example, the church's catechetical leadership has, under the direction of Paul VI and John Paul II, continued to discuss and probe the efficacy of the church's efforts to "translate" Christ's Gospel message. Documents, fruits of these efforts, have continued to emerge: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (1975), *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT) (1979), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) (1992), and, most recently, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) (1997).

These documents have a continuity of themes, a pattern woven throughout their pages. They highlight, for example, that catechetical programs must strive to share the faith "in its entirety," that the goal is "maturity of faith," and that all catechesis is a form of evangelization. Accordingly, these themes are central to catechesis and hence to its assessment, as will be further explained in the following chapters.

Purpose and History of ACRE

The purpose of this book is to provide readers with insights into the effectiveness of this translation effort with students participating in the religion programs of selected Catholic schools and parishes using the ACRE assessment surveys. The evaluation is based on survey responses provided by several thousand high school and grade school students. Although all schools and parishes have access to the universal church's above cited catechetical documents and guidelines, local pastors, principals and catechists set the specific expectations consistent with the students' age, background and capabilities. So the ACRE surveys are not intended to be a test as such and no pass or fail grade is given. Rather, the ACRE surveys ask questions which are consistent with traditional curricular guidelines. Local catechetical leaders then compare the students' level of religious knowledge and beliefs to their locally, predetermined criteria.

For the past two decades, NCEA has provided the catechetical community with age-appropriate instruments to assess the students' levels of religious knowledge, beliefs, concerns and practices. Father Alfred McBride, O. Praem., oversaw the construction of NCEA's initial survey instruments, first used in 1978. Numerous diocesan superintendents of schools and directors of religious education, school principals,

pastors and parish catechetical leaders have contributed to refining the surveys. They have also promoted the use of the NCEA tools to assess the extent to which their religion programs have been effectively "translating" the Gospel message.

In 1976, a committee of Catholic religious educators and catechetical specialists throughout the United States and Canada, through the coordinating efforts of the NCEA, developed the first of three tools. Their objective was to help religious educators monitor how well the school and parish religion programs had been "translating" the word of God "in thought and in life." That first survey instrument, the Religious Education Outcomes Inventory (REOI), assessed the religious knowledge and attitudes of students in Catholic school and parish religion programs at the junior high level. The committee included specialists who based the inventory contents on traditional church teaching, the draft of the *National Catechetical Directory* (NCD), the major catechetical textbooks as well as on wide consultation with theologians and practitioners.

A similar consultative process, by 1978, resulted in an evaluative inventory for use at the high school level: Religious Education Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (REKAP). The third inventory, REDI, was later developed for use in the middle elementary years.

Since that time, well over 100,000 students each year have completed an NCEA assessment survey for grade school and high school level religion programs.

The first extensive research on the surveys was documented in *That They May Know You* (1982), written by Andrew D. Thompson, one of the authors of this report.[2] The findings of that study alerted catechetical leaders to certain strengths and weaknesses in the students' responses to the surveys, REOI and REKAP. That first research report highlighted the value of periodic assessment of the religion program. The chapters of this book present and discuss the major findings of a new analysis of students' responses based on the data gathered by the NCEA during the 1994-95 school year.

Before discussing the current study's actual findings, readers will benefit from considering additional theological and pastoral principles which guided the design and updating of the NCEA assessment instruments. Because the ACRE instruments survey the students' religious beliefs and practices, ACRE indicates the students' acceptance of key religious beliefs. ACRE also illustrates how the students are participat-

ing in the sacraments, prayer and moral living, all of which are central to the students' response to Christ's Gospel call. In this way, ACRE highlights the close relationship between catechesis and evangelization.

ACRE also surveys how students see themselves in relationship to their family, school, peers and parish. By exploring religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and perceptions, ACRE helps to develop some insights into how the entire Christian community seems to be contributing to this "translating" of God's word for the students' world today.

Theological and Pastoral Assessment Principles

The meaning of assessment, like the meaning of catechesis, benefits from a careful use of selected metaphors. When Pope John Paul II introduced the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) to the world in 1992, he compared it to the scribe in Matthew's Gospel who brings forth from his household things both old and new.[3] Dr. Peter Phan, a theologian at The Catholic University of America, associated these two elements with the older Catechism inspired by the Council of Trent (1545) and with the newer documents of the Second Vatican Council (1965).

For Phan, the "old" was represented by the four-fold content outline of the Catechism of the Council of Trent, namely: creed, sacraments, moral life in Christ and prayer. Today's CCC follows this same structure. Phan associated the "new" with the CCC's heavy reliance on the documents of the Second Vatican Council.[4]

The Vatican II documents were primarily pastoral in thrust. They emphasized not doctrinal content, as did Trent, but the need for today's church to effectively relate to the modern world. Vatican II called for liturgical and sacramental renewal to implement the needed adaptation. The fathers of Vatican II, then, addressed the question of the very identity of the church. Therein they encouraged bishops to work together collegially, and the laity to live out their baptismal call to service.

The documents of Vatican II provided guidelines for the church's interface with the world's diversity of faiths and ethnicities. It also spoke of the importance and proper use of technology and media for communicating in today's information age. These pastoral directives of the Vatican Council, how to speak the truth within a religiously and ethnically diverse world and how to use technology to increase communication, are again the two major thrusts which are also evident in

assessing catechesis. Effective catechesis is all about fidelity to the truths of the past while speaking effectively to the pastoral needs of the present.

Catechism of Catholic Church *and Catechetical Efforts*

Put slightly differently, the context for today's catechesis has two bywords: continuity and adaptation. When Pope John Paul II published the CCC in 1992, his apostolic constitution *Fidei Depositum* served as its preface. Therein, speaking of the CCC, he said:

> This *Catechism* is not intended to replace the local catechisms . . . [but] to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms which take into account the different situations and cultures but which carefully guard the unity of the faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine. (#4)

This twofold thrust, continuity with the old and adaptation to today's world, is by no means a new idea for Pope John Paul II. Rather, it is integral to the church's ongoing efforts to effectively translate the Gospel message for today's circumstances. Fifteen years before the publication of the CCC, the 1977 worldwide Synod of Bishops met to discuss catechesis. The Pope, then Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, was a participant. Two years later, as Pope John Paul II, he summarized that synod's concerns in his apostolic letter, *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT). Church historian Berard Marthaler, OFM Conv., has called this document "the most comprehensive statement on the catechetical ministry in the church's annals." In *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), the Holy Father said that the earlier *General Catechetical Directory* (1971) remained the standard reference for all catechisms.

In CT, Pope John Paul II praised the two councils of Trent and Vatican II. Trent, he singled out for inspiring the *Roman Catechism* (1566), "a work of the first rank as a summary of the Christian teaching and traditional theology" (CT 13). This Trent-inspired *Roman Catechism*, with its fourfold content, provided the structure on which the CCC is based. The pope prayed that the Second Vatican Council would "stir up in our time a like enthusiasm and similar activity," namely, that the CCC would inspire the publication of local catechisms that are real models for our time.

The point of recalling these church documents is to stress that the publication of the CCC does not introduce something entirely new into

the catechetical scene. Rather, it called for both the new and the old, for continuity and adaptation, to come together in order for catechesis to be effective. These are the priorities which religion teachers, catechetical publishers and the NCEA ACRE surveys have consistently affirmed and supported.

The Vatican Council did not call for an international catechism, which the CCC is. Rather, the council called for catechetical guidelines in the form of an international directory. Those guidelines were published as the *General Catechetical Directory* (GDC, 1971) and provided a basis for national directories to implement the Vatican Council's pastoral adaptations. *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States* (1978) then applied the principles and guidelines of the GCD to a nation of over 200 million people with diverse backgrounds. So the CCC did not come from the Vatican Council as such, for the council did not call for nor foresee a universal catechism.

In 1992, two decades after the GCD encouraged catechetical adaptation to diverse nations and cultures, John Paul II has reemphasized the importance of doctrinal content in publishing the CCC. But he has done so by urging the bringing together of both the "old and new" and by encouraging today's catechetical leadership to so translate the Gospel, as to make it become the "leaven of all cultures."

A further clarification needs to be made here. The church's recent documents are urging catechetical leaders to be concerned about something beyond history, beyond teaching "something old and something new." Rather, when the pope urges that the Gospel be accepted "in thought and in life," as cited at the beginning of this chapter, he points to a deeper level of integration. He urges every believer to study the Gospel and tradition in order to integrate these religious understandings into his or her beliefs, liturgical celebrations, moral living and prayer.

Similarly, Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has consistently stressed the wholeness, sameness and immutable nature of the Christian message. Yet, he also affirmed the need for adaptation:

> This truth, while remaining ever the same, whole, and immutable, admits and even of its nature demands variety and diversity in its cultural clothing, in its modes of understanding and expression, in accordance with places, times, cultures and persons.[5]

NCEA Assessment Tools Assess Both Religious Knowledge and Its Integration in Life

By surveying elementary and secondary level students, the NCEA's ACRE provides catechetical leaders with an opportunity to evaluate what religious content the students have absorbed and how they may be integrating the religious knowledge and beliefs into their lives. To an extent, the structure of the ACRE surveys parallel these two needs. The ACRE surveys have four sections. Section A probes the students' level of religious knowledge, which many catechists associate with doctrinal continuity with the past. Sections B, C and D probe the students' level of religious beliefs, practices and perceptions, affective areas which many catechists associate with adapting and translating the faith into daily action.

Closer examination, however, suggests that all four sections pertain to the continuity with the past. Religious beliefs and participation in liturgical and sacramental experiences are indeed about continuity with the past. Similarly, the students' religious knowledge tells something about how they are adapting and learning the church's teaching in today's language.

This nuance being acknowledged, however, it is helpful to recognize that the priorities for continuity and adaptation are built into the structure of the ACRE instruments. By documenting students' responses in all four sections, the NCEA provides important feedback for the directors of school-based and parish-based religion programs. The catechists, by comparing student responses against the religious program's expectations, can determine the strengths and weaknesses of the students' religious knowledge and how the youths are translating this faith into their religious practices.

Accordingly, ACRE section A addresses the first need, for systematic religious knowledge, by assessing the extent to which students have learned key religious understandings across the spectrum of seven content areas, here called domains: God, Jesus, Worship, Sacraments, Scripture, Morality and Religious Terminology. The more affective areas are reported according to seven themes: the students' Relationship with Jesus, Images of God, Catholic Identity, Morality, Concerns, Relationships with Others, and, Perceptions about School, Parish and Religious Education Program.

ACRE helps catechists assess the second need, to integrate these understandings into life, by a two-step method. The ACRE survey first

identifies the students' religious knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, practices and perceptions. Catechetical leaders can then examine the responses in order to identify consistencies and inconsistencies in how students are "translating" their knowledge and beliefs into actions, how they are integrating them into their lives. This research report uses statistical analysis to accomplish the comparison. Such comparisons can also be made by catechists and diocesan leaders without the use of statistics.

By means of these two steps, the NCEA ACRE surveys support the principles which Pope John Paul II said must guide national catechisms and the catechetical process, namely, continuity and adaptation. Both principles are supported by the ACRE assessment tools. This research report helps readers appreciate this wonderful twofold vision: *what* the students know and believe and, to an extent, *how* they know it, how they integrate their religious understandings, beliefs, their images of God, church and parish, and other key relationships.

Findings of Earlier NCEA Research

Before presenting the recent findings of research with ACRE surveys completed in 1994-95, readers can gain further perspective by considering an overview of the earlier findings. The REOI and REKAP survey instruments, although less sophisticated statistically than today's ACRE instruments, do form a backdrop for the current research.

Over 200,000 youths participated in the NCEA inventories during the two school years, 1979-80 and 1980-81. From this large group, a representative sampling of 6,000 students' surveys were studied, in equal numbers from Catholic schools and parish religious education programs. That sample was also equally divided between 11th- and 12th-grade high school students (REKAP) and 8th-grade elementary school youths (REOI). At the time of that study, the REDI survey for 5th-and 6th-grades did not exist.

The findings were somewhat predictable but contained a few discoveries. For professional and knowledgeable religious educators and program administrators, the predictable findings pertained to the areas of religious knowledge in which the students were particularly strong (Christ, sacraments) and weak (religious terminology). *That They May Know You* reported these findings within a framework of 10 content themes of special concern for those responsible for religious education in schools and parishes. Those 10 themes parallel the content areas promoted by the *General Catechetical Directory*.

I. God-Centered Catechesis
II. Christ-Centered Catechesis
III. Church
IV. Grace
V. Sacraments
VI. Conscience and Moral Principles
VII. Sexuality
VIII. Social Justice
IX. Prayer and Spirituality
X. Eschatology: Death, Judgment and Union with God

Findings indicated that junior high REOI and senior high REKAP students were most knowledgeable about baptism and Eucharist. They correctly recognized baptism as initiation into the community (REOI: 85%) or as birth into the church (REKAP: 80%). The majority said they attended Sunday Eucharist (REKAP: 81%) and prayed during Mass (REOI: 77%), even though many were bored and distracted (REOI: 38%).

The students' knowledge of church teaching concerning Christ was also very strong. *That They May Know You* reported, for example, that 88% of the senior high youths correctly associated the term "salvation" with Christ freeing people from sin (p.14).

On the other hand, knowledge of traditional theological language pertaining to Jesus was a weak area for many students. Only half the secondary school youths understood the terms "Incarnation," "Paschal mystery" and "revelation" (p.14).

Several of the discoveries came from a careful statistical analysis of the students' responses. One of the strongest statistical correlations between any two statements in REKAP concerned Christ and finding meaning in life. When students stated that knowing Christ made them feel better about themselves, those students tended also to affirm the belief that religion answered real questions about the meaning of life (p. 15) This finding, statistically speaking, was strong (r=.45). More important, it was one of several findings which illustrated that when students said they had a close relationship with Christ, they also tended to say various other aspects of religious faith were important to them. This type of finding showed that for many students, Christ was personally important. But this earlier finding also provided a hint that this closeness to Christ might very well be central to how the students lived out their faith, a thesis revisited in the current ACRE findings reported here.

Additional important findings reported by the earlier study of the REKAP and REOI surveys came from statistical analyses which included

factor analysis and cross-classification analysis. These more sophisticated statistical tools identified patterns which could have been missed by standard statistical correlations and analysis. For example,

> The single most powerful predictor of the extent of the youths' religious socialization, as suggested by the findings from the REKAP inventory, was the extent to which the youth said he or she "talked with my parents or family about religious/moral matters" (p. 75).

The senior high youths who said they talked with their parents were much more likely to say knowing Christ made them feel better about themselves, were more likely to pray regularly, and to affirm that their religious beliefs made a difference in the way they thought and acted.

For junior high youths who completed the REOI survey, there was a similarly strong finding. Youths who said they trusted their parents' advice about friendship, dating and sex were much more likely to reject the opinion that it was alright to get drunk at a party. They also were more likely, four times more likely, to disagree with the statement that warnings about drugs were greatly exaggerated, than were youths who said they did not trust their parents' advice (p. 76).

Given that the goal of catechesis is "maturity of faith," which Pope John Paul II describes as students "translating" their faith into their lives, these earlier findings were very encouraging. Those findings, however, pertained to yesterday, to the early 1980's. How do they pertain to today's catechetical situation?

Implications of REOI-REKAP Findings for Current Report

Partly as a result of the above described major REOI-REKAP findings (for example, the strong interplay between the students' personal relationship with Christ and the trusting relationship with their parents) the revised 1992 ACRE surveys included additional questions about key relationships. There was increased interest in learning about the students' images of God, and how students felt about the church, their parish, school and religion program.

Today's catechists and church leaders want to know if the key findings described in the NCEA 1982 report continued to surface in the ACRE findings. Based on the earlier study, catechists could hope that

religious instruction, the parish community and family life would somehow come together to make a positive difference in the way youth think and act in everyday life. Is there anything in ACRE findings about these contributing elements which predict when this "translating" will be successful?

Today's catechetical leadership continues to be interested in knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the students' religious knowledge. This assessment will be reported according to 7 content themes or knowledge domains, very similar to the 10 religious knowledge domains used for the REOI and REKAP study.

Leaders also want to know the extent to which they can discern how students are "translating" their faith with regard to the more affective or 7 relationship areas. These 7 areas include the student's relationship with Jesus, images of God, Catholic identity, morality, students' concerns, relationships with others and perceptions about the school's or parish's religion program.

Between the 1982 report and today, many changes have occurred in the church and American society. A study published in 1996, for example, reported on a 10 year analysis of student academic performance. It surveyed 20,000 high school students and their families. Two findings in particular seem relevant to socialization in America, and hence to religious socialization. First, the researchers found that many parents had given up on some of their parenting responsibilities and seemed to have distanced themselves from their adolescent children's personal lives. Second, the researchers concluded that parents and peers have a more critical influence on teenagers' academic performance than does the school environment.[6]

That study of public schools, students and families emphasized the importance of parents knowing their child's peers, and of parental involvement with the school personnel and with other parents. In other words, building the social web was more important than parents checking on the sons' or daughters' homework.

Clearly, these educational findings pertain to the heart of our contemporary culture. Accordingly, they encourage catechists to recognize that peer and parental relationships are central to the catechetical challenge of our day. These cultural components suggest that catechetical assessment needs to include but also to go beyond concern with the cognitive content, with the religious knowledge outlined in the curriculum.

Readers will recall the pastoral principles cited at the beginning of this chapter. In particular John Paul II, writing to Cardinal Sanchez, called on all catechetical leaders to strive to have the Gospel speak effectively to the core values of the culture. He urged catechetical leaders to make:

> a constant effort to "translate" this word, to make it accessible to all those for whom it is intended, so that, accepted in thought and in life, it can become the leaven of all cultures, giving life to Christian-inspired practices, morals and institutions.[7]

Also, in 1997, the introductory chapter of the *General Directory For Catechesis* spoke about how the Gospel message must influence culture. The GDC stresses the need to discern the positive and negative characteristics of the "field," culture, in which the Gospel's seeds are to be sown (#14). Given that evangelization must address itself to the core values of every culture, and that catechesis is an instrument of evangelization, these findings from educational research concerning the strengths and weaknesses of parental contributions pertain directly to how well our schools and parish programs "translate" the Gospel message into the students' lives.

Conclusion

The above cited educational research findings and those of other contemporary studies were consistent with REOI-REKAP findings. Together, they pointed to the importance of the parent-child relationship, to the value of youth identity within a social network, to the importance of interpersonal trust and how youth bond with other people. These earlier reported findings raise many important questions for catechists to ponder. So these same questions are central to our current ACRE study, whose findings are reported below.

Chapter 2 familiarizes readers with the statistical properties of the ACRE surveys themselves. Researchers will want to examine this chapter because it documents the statistical reliability of the ACRE surveys. Similarly, Chapter 2 explains the statistical methods of factor and regression analysis and how this study identified "predictors" of the students' religious knowledge and practices. The authors hope all readers will review this chapter because it explains terminology and concepts used to report the study's findings.

Religion teachers, who have a pastoral rather than statistical orientation, will find Chapter 3 and subsequent chapters more user-friendly than Chapter 2. The later chapters report the findings pertaining to the students' religious knowledge, religious beliefs, practices and perceptions, as well as the interesting patterns which the research identified among these elements.

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[1] Pope John Paul II, "Message to Cardinal Jose T. Sanchez," September 20, 1994, on the occasion of the 1994 Plenary Session of the International Council for Catechesis, published originally in *l'Osservatore Romano* (October 5, 1994) and reprinted in *Living Light*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Spring 1995, pp. 69-71, at p. 70.

[2] Andrew D. Thompson, *That They May Know You*, NCEA, Washington, DC, 1982.

[3] *Fidei Depositum*, preface to CCC.

[4] "What is old and what is new in the Catechism?," op.cit., *Living Light*, pp. 56-71

[5] Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Authority of the Catechism," *Living Light*, vol. 29 #4, 1993, p. 46 where he quotes Ratzinger's article "Catechismo e Inculturazione," in *Il Regno-Documenti*, vol. 37, November 1, 1992, p. 587.

[6] Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996.

[7] "Message to Cardinal Jose T. Sanchez," op. cit.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology for the Study

Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the methodology used in the study. Every analysis of data that claims to be objective must meet the generally acceptable standards for empirical research. The findings reported in this book flow from research using a methodology and a survey that meet and, in most cases, exceed these standards. Chapter 2 is written to address the technical questions concerning these standards. Therefore, on occasion, the language used is unavoidably technical in nature. Nonetheless, all readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the basic notions and the big picture presented in this chapter, even if occasional details may seem impenetrable.

Chapter 2 is essentially descriptive in that it presents each of the component elements of this study. The methodology begins by defining the "sample," that is, the group of students who completed the ACRE surveys and who were included in the study. The sample was selected from a larger group of students in such a way as to reduce any bias that could influence the results. The chapter also contains a description of

the technical properties of the ACRE surveys. The definitions and findings presented in the 10 tables in Chapter Two give readers reason to be confident in the use of the ACRE surveys. The results show the ACRE has excellent technical properties.

ACRE contains two types of items, some measuring religious knowledge and others measuring sentiments. The clusters of religious knowledge items, here called domains, meet the appropriate standards for assessment. They have the internal consistency reliability required for research. Table 2.4 shows that 21 of the 22 knowledge domains exceed the minimally acceptable reliability standards. Similarly, the seven clusters of religious sentiment items, which measure the students' religious beliefs, attitudes, personal practices and perceptions, shown in table 2.5, enjoy even stronger internal consistency reliability, beyond the standard required.

Readers will also become comfortable with the notion that the students' responses to the items in ACRE can be gathered into statistically recognized patterns, called factors, as described in tables 2.6 through 2.10. This notion of factor is important for understanding the discussion in Chapter 6 of the relationships among the students' religious knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, practices and perceptions.

The first part of the chapter contains a description of the subjects and their characteristics. Next, the content domains and reliability of Section A of ACRE, which assesses the students' religious knowledge, are described. The next section contains a description of the structure and reliability of Sections B, C, and D, which assess beliefs, attitudes, practices and perceptions. Finally, the resulting factors emerging from a factor analysis of Sections B, C, and D are described, along with their reliability.

Readers who are statistically oriented will want to review carefully the material in this chapter. Other readers who primarily have a pastoral orientation may want to spend less time on these methodological issues; however, it is still important to review the content in this chapter since the concepts developed provide the content for understanding the study's conclusions.

How Students Were Selected

The data are from students in Catholic schools and parish-based religious education programs who took ACRE during the 1994-1995 school year. Since this population numbered over 139,000, the decision was

made to select a smaller sample based on a stratified random sampling process so that the resulting sample would be representative of all students who took ACRE that year. The following process was used to determine that sample.

1. The National Catholic Educational Association provided eight sets of ACRE data for the 1994-1995 school year, four for Catholic school programs and four for parish programs, one each according to the level of ACRE taken, with ACRE2 divided into eighth graders and ninth graders.

2. A random sample of 1,000 students was selected from each of the five data sets that contained more than 9,000 students. These were ACRE1 Catholic School Programs (48,441 students), ACRE1 Parish Programs (13,059 students), ACRE2 – Eighth-Grade Catholic School Programs (44,484 students), ACRE2 – Eighth-Grade Parish Programs (9,441 students), and ACRE3 Catholic School Programs (16,241 students).

3. For the remaining data sets, a random sample of 400 students was selected from ACRE2 – Ninth-Grade Catholic School Programs (5,490 students) and ACRE3 Parish Programs (1,649 students), and a 20 percent sample of 117 students from ACRE2 – Ninth-Grade Parish Programs (587 students).

4. The records of 89 students were eliminated from the total sample of 5,917 students because of extensive missing data. This resulted in a working sample of 5,828 students.

5. The sample was then divided into three groups: non-Catholics attending Catholic schools, Catholics attending Catholic schools, and Catholics attending parish programs.

Table 2.1 shows the distribution of the sample used for the analyses in this study. This sample represents approximately four percent of the population who took ACRE that year.

Table 2.1
Distribution of the Sample by Group and Level of ACRE

Level of ACRE	Non-Catholics in Catholic Schools	Catholics in Catholic Schools	Catholics in Parish Program
ACRE1	119	882	986
ACRE2 – 8th	95	902	971
ACRE2 – 9th	75	309	111
ACRE3	179	817	382
Total	468	2910	2450

The scientific stratified random sampling procedure used to select the students ensures that the sample is representative of the population who took ACRE during the 1994-1995 school year. Therefore, the results of analyses regarding the properties of ACRE that would be useful in establishing normative levels of performance for that year have strong validity. On the other hand, the reader should be careful about extending findings regarding performance, sentiments and practices beyond what is possible from the data. The population of students who took ACRE is not necessarily representative of all students who attended Catholic schools that year, nor of those who participated in parish religious education programs that year. Nor is it necessarily representative of all Catholic students at those grade levels.

Finally, the reader should note that the major findings of this study are based on the analysis of the data from Catholic students only. However, non-Catholic students were initially included to assess the technical characteristics of ACRE and to provide a national portrait that accurately represents the 1994-1995 population of students who complete the ACRE surveys.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Table 2.2 shows some selected demographic characteristics of the sample. A small majority of the students were female. Males slightly outnumbered females only in two groups: Catholics in parish programs who took ACRE1 and non-Catholic ninth-graders who took ACRE2.

More than three-fourths of the entire sample were white and non-Hispanic, slightly more than ten percent were Hispanic, about five

percent were African American, and the remainder identified themselves as "other," which was the fourth option available to respondents. African Americans constituted more than a third of the non-Catholics in Catholic elementary schools who took ACRE, but only about a fifth of those who took it in Catholic high schools. Only a small percentage of Catholics in Catholic schools and parish programs who took ACRE were African American. Hispanics who took ACRE were more likely to be in Catholic schools than in parish programs.

Table 2.2 Selected Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Selected Characteristics	Non-Catholics in Catholic School	Catholics in Catholic School	Catholics in Parish Program	Total
% Female				
ACRE1	54	50	46	48
ACRE2 – 8th	64	56	52	54
ACRE2 – 9th	47	55	53	54
ACRE3	51	56	51	54
% White, Non-Hispanic				
ACRE1	40	68	90	70
ACRE2 – 8th	39	64	89	75
ACRE2 – 9th	80	79	89	81
ACRE3	60	76	86	76
% African American				
ACRE1	42	3	1	4
ACRE2 – 8th	34	3	1	3
ACRE2 – 9th	15	3	1	4
ACRE3	23	3	1	5
% Hispanic				
ACRE1	3	18	4	10
ACRE2 – 8th	7	24	5	14
ACRE2 – 9th	0	14	5	10
ACRE3	6	14	8	12
% Attend Mass[1]				
ACRE1	23	56	48	50
ACRE2 – 8th	28	53	53	52
ACRE2 – 9th	22	55	55	50
ACRE3	24	45	68	49

Slightly more than half of the Catholic students who took ACRE reported always or regularly attending Mass on weekends. Reported regular Mass attendance by Catholics was lowest (45 percent) for the juniors and seniors in Catholic high schools who took ACRE and highest (68 percent) among the juniors and seniors in parish programs who took ACRE. This latter finding may be indicative of the select sample of Catholic students who continue to participate in parish religion education programs after the eighth grade.

Religious Knowledge

The first assessment area (Part A) of each level of ACRE measures religious knowledge within seven domains: God, Church, Worship, Sacraments, Scripture, Morality, and Religious Terminology. ACRE3 contains an eighth domain: Christian Hope. Each domain has seven items.

The content for the items is based on definitions that relate to the theme of the domain. The content of the items is in line with the Church's traditional teachings, as found in catechetical documents, including the *General Catechetical Directory*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the *General Directory for Catechesis*. ACRE, however, in no way embraces the full range of the content of these extensive documents.

Many items have appeared on earlier versions of ACRE and some have been adapted, with the advice of catechetical leaders, for the current version. Care was taken to develop the items in a way to assure the content validity of each domain. The content validity of a domain is a minimum standard that any assessment of knowledge should meet. The definitions for the domains follow:

God	Basic Catholic teaching about God, Father, Son and Spirit, and the development of a personal faith relationship with God
Church	Important aspects of the mystery of the church as related to its origin, mission, leadership and membership
Worship	Liturgical feasts, seasons, religious practices and concepts of prayer

Sacraments	Sacraments of the Catholic Church as signs and expressions of Christ's saving action in people's lives
Scripture	Scripture as God's revealed word, the major divisions of the Bible, the chief persons in biblical history and major biblical themes
Morality	Teachings of Jesus and the church as the basis of Christian morality, and the importance of a well-formed conscience for decision-making
Religious Terms	Christian religious terminology appropriate for students' grade level
Christian Hope	Biblical and church teachings about eternal destiny

Reliability of the ACRE Religious Knowledge Domains

The reliability of an assessment instrument or test is a measure of the consistency of responses to items either within the test (internal consistency), between the same test given at different times (test-retest), or between two equivalent versions of a test (alternate forms). The measure of reliability used in this study is internal consistency since the other two methods of assessing reliability involve testing the same students twice, either with the identical test or another version of it. The latter methods normally require a controlled study and are rarely available from administrations of tests in practical settings. In any event, an internal consistency measure of reliability is standard and is normally calculated even if other measures of reliability were contemplated. The measure of internal consistency used in this study is Cronbach's Alpha. In general, for a test of at least 40 items, a Cronbach's Alpha in excess of .80 is considered a measure of adequate reliability. This number is used as a standard in this study.

Table 2.3 ACRE Results: 1994-1995 religious knowledge

	Non-Catholics in Catholic Schools	Catholics in Catholic Schools	Catholics in Parish Programs
ACRE1	49 Items	Reliability = .880	
Mean	35.93	38.95	33.60
S.D.	8.37	6.75	7.76
N	119	882	986
ACRE2 - 8th	49 Items	Reliability = .908	
Mean	34.39	39.39	31.87
S.D.	8.42	7.16	8.58
N	95	902	971
ACRE2 - 9th	49 Items	Reliability = .913	
Mean	32.12	39.40	33.82
S.D.	9.16	7.66	8.28
N	75	309	111
ACRE3	56 Items	Reliability = .910	
Mean	35.77	40.52	36.50
S.D.	10.58	9.06	9.46
N	179	817	382

Table 2.3 shows the internal consistency reliability estimates, as well as the average scores (Means) and the variability of these scores (S.D., an abbreviation for Standard Deviation) for the groups on each level of ACRE. The reliability estimates for the levels of ACRE proved to be more than adequate, ranging from a .880 for ACRE1 to .913 for ACRE2. The average scores and variability measures are presented simply for normative purposes to give some sense of the level of performance of the students in the different groups. These data could be useful to a parish or school program to assess how the performance of its students on religious knowledge compares with the performance of a national sample of students who took ACRE. Care should be exercised in comparing scores across levels of ACRE since the item sets are not identical and the level of item difficulty varies. The difficulty of each of the religious knowledge items, which is measured by the percentage of students who answer an item correctly, is given in the tables in Chapter Three.

Table 2.4 shows the internal consistency reliability estimates for the domains in each level of ACRE. The internal consistency reliability for a domain is based on the degree of relationship among the items and the number of items in the domain. Shorter tests generally have lower reliabilities than longer tests. The minimally acceptable reliability for a 7-item domain determined by the Spearman Brown Formula is .412. This estimate will result in a reliability of .800 if each domain is lengthened to 40 items. Using this standard the reliability estimates are adequate, except for the score on the Church domain on ACRE1.

Table 2.4 Reliability of ACRE Religious Knowledge Domains

Domain	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
God	.436	.523	.505
Church	.386	.553	.499
Worship	.518	.569	.601
Sacraments	.570	.664	.734
Scripture	.497	.553	.516
Morality	.617	.687	.640
Religious Terms	.534	.576	.606
Christian Hope	—	—	.571
Total	.880	.910	.910

The reliability estimates on all domains are higher for ACRE2 and ACRE3 than for ACRE1. Basically, this finding implies that the scores of the older students are more stable and consistent than the scores of the younger students. The highest reliability estimates occur for the Sacrament and Morality domains, while the lowest occur for the Church, God and Scripture domains.

Beliefs, Attitudes, Practices and Perceptions

The remaining sections of ACRE assess the students' personal beliefs and attitudes (Section B), personal practices (Section C) and perceptions of their schools, their parishes and themselves (Section D). In these sections, the students are instructed to choose the answer that is closest to their own beliefs, attitudes, practices and perceptions. The students are also told that their answers to questions in these sections

are confidential and that no reports are made that will reveal their personal beliefs or attitudes.

These sections in ACRE1 contain fewer items than the corresponding sections in ACRE2 and ACRE3. In ACRE1, Section B contains 26 items, Section C has 14 items and Section D has 21 items. The students use a three-step scale from Agree to Disagree to respond to items in Section B and Section D, and another three-step scale from Always/Regularly to Never to respond to items in Section C.

In ACRE2, Section B contains 41 items, Section C has 20 items and Section D has 28 items. The students use a five-step scale from Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly to respond to items in Section B and Section D, and a four-step scale from Always/Regularly to Never to respond to items in Section C. ACRE3 is structured in a similar fashion, except that Section B contains 42 items. The vast majority of the items in these sections are the same in ACRE2 and ACRE3.

The items in these sections were developed according to seven themes or domains: Relationship with Jesus, Images of God, Catholic Identity, Morality, Students' Concerns, Relationship with Others, and Perceptions about School, Parish and Religious Education Program. A content plan was followed in writing items to measure these domains.

Reliability of the ACRE Sentiment Domains

Table 2.5 shows the number of items in each domain and the internal consistency reliability of each sentiment domain, using the value of Cronbach's Alpha. As with the reliability estimates for the ACRE religious knowledge domains, an estimate of .412 was used as the minimally acceptable standard for the reliability of the seven sentiment domains. As indicated in Table 2.5, the reliability estimates for the domains far exceed this standard, especially in ACRE2 and ACRE3.

Table 2.5 Original Sentiment Domains for Sections B, C, and D and their Reliabilities

Domain	Number of Items	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
Relationship with Jesus	Level 1: 7 Level 2: 7 Level 3: 7	.481	.714	.823
Images of God	Level 1: 8 Level 2: 9 Level 3: 9	.415	.614	.661
Catholic Identity	Level 1: 12 Level 2: 14 Level 3: 14	.769	.869	.901
Morality	Level 1: 9 Level 2: 22 Level 3: 23	.479	.836	.841
Students' Concerns	Level 1: 6 Level 2: 6 Level 3: 6	.577	.638	.600
Relationship with Others	Level 1: 9 Level 2: 14 Level 3: 14	.693	.813	.789
Perceptions about School, Parish, Religion Program	Level 1: 11 Level 2: 17 Level 3: 17	.801	.904	.877

Factor Analysis

In order to investigate whether the domains in Table 2.5 could be further subdivided into constructs that would be more useful in our analysis, a statistical technique called factor analysis was used. Factor

analysis attempts to identify clusters of items to which students respond in a similar fashion. The items in the clusters are assumed to be part of a homogeneous set that represents some factor. The factor, which is assumed to be latent, is identified and named only after the homogeneous item cluster is isolated and examined.

Several methods can be used to perform a factor analysis. In general, the principal ways these methods differ is in the choice of the model employed to extract the factors and the rotation scheme used to get a better "look" at the factors. This study used a principal axis factor model and then applied a varimax rotation to assist in the naming of the factors. A separate factor analysis was conducted for each level of ACRE. In each case, Section B and Section D were analyzed together because they used exactly the same response scale. Section C was analyzed separately from Section B and Section D.

The factors resulting from the factor analysis, along with their names and the reliability of each, are given in Table 2.6. In general, factors for ACRE2 and ACRE3 are better defined than the factors from ACRE1. There are several likely reasons for this. First, ACRE2 and ACRE3 contained more items in these sections than did ACRE1, thus permitting more diversity. Second, the number of steps in the scales in ACRE2 and ACRE3 was greater than the number in ACRE1, thus permitting more variability in responses and allowing more stable correlations to exist among the items. Third, the students taking ACRE2 and ACRE3 are older than those taking ACRE1 and thus they may have more developed sentiments and usually greater consistency in their patterns of practice. In addition, the eighth graders and older students are more experienced in taking these types of surveys than the fifth graders and, in some cases, fourth graders, who took ACRE1.

Table 2.6 Factors Resulting from Factor Analysis and Their Reliability Estimates

Domain	ACRE1		ACRE2		ACRE3	
	Items	Reliability	Items	Reliability	Items	Reliability
Image of God	7	.541				
Loving God image			3	.687	3	.743
Distant God Image			2	.653	2	.669
Relationship with Jesus	6	.623	6	.829	6	.894
Catholic Identity	5	.662	8	.856	9	.890
Moral	6	.592				
Moral: Personal Actions			3	.734	5	.757
Moral: Concerns			5	.636	4	.739
Moral: Gender Equality			3	.711	3	.763
Moral: Sex			3	.706	3	.766
Moral: Drugs			3	.852		
Moral: Abortion					2	.821
Family Relationships	6	.620			6	.722
Religious Practice	5	.538	5	.618	5	.722
Social Responsibility	3	.494	7	.753	4	.646
Talking About Issues			4	.714	3	.748
Service			3	.589	3	.647
Student Concerns	5	.627	5	.688	5	.650
Parish Perceptions	2	.492	3	.769	3	.809
Religion Teacher Influence	2	.475	2	.741	2	.761
School/Program Perceptions	6	.786	11	.879	11	.861

Beliefs

The factor analysis of the belief items in Section B resulted in distinct clusters related to how students viewed God, their beliefs about Jesus and the relationship they have with him, and their beliefs about certain key elements of the Catholic faith. Table 2.7 contains the factors and the factor loadings, which are weights that indicate the strength of the relationship between the item and the factor, resulting from the principal axis factor solution of items in Section B.

Table 2.7 Principal Axis Factor Analysis of Belief Items: Factors and Loadings

Factor	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
I think of God as a strict judge.	God Image		
If I do a lot of wrongful things, God will stop loving me.	God Image		
Loving God image			
I believe one way God speaks to us is through the Bible.	God Image		.4619
I think God is like a loving parent.	God Image	.6321	.5876
I would like to learn how to get closer to God.	God Image	.5808	
I think that someday I'm going to be with God in heaven.	God Image	.4393	.4863
Distant God Image			
Sometimes I feel as though God pays no attention to me.	God Image	.6756	.7561
At times I feel that God does not care about me.		.6331	.6566
Relationship with Jesus			
My friendship with Jesus really helps me.	.4457	.6789	.6979
I look upon Jesus as my savior and friend.	.3508	.6549	.6934
I am a follower of Jesus.	.4048	.6723	.6850
I believe that Jesus is both truly divine and truly human.	.3297	.6040	.6518
I believe that Jesus cured the blind and raised the dead.	.3469	.5555	.6410
I feel Jesus really understands me.	.5870	.5993	.6231

continued next page

Table 2.7 continued

Catholic Identity			
Being Catholic is important to me.	.6093	.6490	.6932
I believe that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist.	.4127	.6293	.6590
Mary, the mother of Jesus, is important in my life.	.5528	.6686	.6402
Receiving the sacrament of confirmation is important to me.		.5607	.6131
Going to Mass is important to me.	.7161	.6080	.6041
I would like to learn how to get closer to God.			.5180
I would like to learn more about my religion.		.5431	.4856
It makes sense for someone to become a sister, brother or priest.		.3723	.4520
I like to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.	.4765	.4123	.4474

The **image of God** factor on ACRE1 portrays God as a loving parent that one anticipates being with someday in heaven and who speaks through the bible. The factor also contains items that portray God in a negative sense as a strict judge who sometimes pays no attention to and who will stop loving persons who do a lot of wrongful things. These latter items are, statistically speaking, inversely related to the former items. The factor analysis of image of God on ACRE1 was not stable, so all items were retained on the factor as originally defined in the content domains and no loadings were reported for them.

In the factor analysis of ACRE2 and ACRE3, the **image of God** factor divides into two components according to whether God is perceived as loving, personable and desirable or as strict and disinterested. In the former case, the factor is named **loving God image** and in the latter case as **distant God image**. Despite having more items (seven items), the reliability of the **image of God** factor in ACRE1 is less than the reliability of the **loving God image** factor (three items) and the distant God image factor (two items) in ACRE2 and ACRE3.

The **relationship with Jesus** factor is prominent in all three levels of ACRE and contains exactly the same items. The factor includes feeling of positive relationship with Jesus, belief in his power, and an acknowledgment of being his follower. The factor is less well defined on ACRE1 than on ACRE2 and ACRE3. Likewise, the reliability of the factor is lower for ACRE1 than for ACRE2 and ACRE3, where in both cases the reliability is very strong.

The **Catholic identity** factor is well defined and occurs for each level of ACRE. As is the case with the other factors in this set, the factor analysis yields a more stable **Catholic identity** factor for ACRE2 and ACRE3 than for ACRE1. This factor deals with issues and beliefs that are important for Catholics and, in some cases, specific to the Catholics faith. Included in this factor are the importance of being a Catholic and going to Mass, participation in the sacramental life of the church, recognition of the importance of Mary's role, and a desire to learn more about one's religion. This factor's reliability is among the highest in each level of ACRE.

Morality

Although part of the belief items in Section B, a separate factor analysis was conducted for the items dealing with morality. Table 2.8 contains the results of this analysis. A general **moral** factor emerges on ACRE1. The factor contains six items that deal with stealing, cheating, lying, gender equality and the use of drugs. This factor divides into several well-defined components in ACRE2 and ACRE3. These components are described below.

Moral: Personal Actions. This factor deals with appropriate behaviors in situations. The factor differs slightly in ACRE2 and ACRE3. In ACRE2, the factor consists of three items dealing with lying and cheating. In ACRE3, the factor has five items that include behaviors concerning alcohol, sexual relations and drugs, in addition to lying and cheating.

Moral Concerns. This factor, which is present in ACRE2 and ACRE3, deals with concern for those who are hungry, concern for the poor, violence and racial tolerance. The factor in ACRE2 has an additional item that deals with feelings about those with AIDS.

Moral: Gender Equality. This factor, which is present in ACRE2 and ACRE3, has three items that deal with gender equality in leadership and job opportunities.

Moral: Sex. This factor, which is present in ACRE2 and ACRE3, contains three items that deal with premarital sexual behavior.

Table 2.8 Principal Axis Factor Analysis of Morality Items: Factors and Loadings

Factor	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
It is wrong to take an item from a store without paying for it.	Moral		
Moral: Gender Equality			
A girl can be as effective a leader as a boy.	Moral	.7163	.7731
I believe women and men can be equally effective as spiritual leaders.		.5748	.7324
Men and women should be treated equally in their jobs.		.6641	.7127
Moral: Personal Actions			
It is all right to try drugs.		Drugs	.5618
No one really gets hurt by sexual relations among teenagers.			.5402
Copying during a test is simply a case of one student helping another.	Moral	.4528	.5214
It is all right for people my age to drink alcohol at a party.		Drugs	.4883
It is all right to tell a lie to keep from getting into trouble.	Moral	.5524	.4831
It is okay to lie as long as I don't get caught.	Moral	.5562	
Moral: Drugs			
It is all right to try drugs.	Moral	.6366	Actions
Drugs are not as harmful as most people say they are.		.6455	
It is all right for people my age to drink alcohol at a party.		.5554	Actions

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Table 2.8 continued

Moral: Concerns			
I am concerned about the amount of violence in the world.		.3500	.4880
People suffering from hunger are a real concern for me.		.3195	.4701
It is okay to exclude some people because of race or national background.		.3295	.4633
I believe rich countries should help poor countries.		.3651	.4471
I feel sad about people who get sick with AIDS.		.3600	
Moral: Sex			
It is important to me to wait until marriage before having sexual intercourse.		.6598	.7660
Sexual intercourse outside of marriage is wrong.		.6392	.6367
I think it's all right for a couple to live together before getting married.		.3943	.4098
Moral: Abortion			
I believe abortion is wrong.			.8350
Abortion is immoral, even in cases of serious hardship.			.7044

Moral: Drugs. Issues concerning drugs exist as a separate factor only for ACRE2. The three items that constitute this factor deal with underage students drinking alcohol, drugs not being harmful and the sentiment that it is all right to try drugs. The factor has a very high reliability.

Moral: Abortion. The two items that constitute this factor are present only on ACRE3. The items address the recognition that abortion is wrong and immoral.

Personal Practices

Table 2.9 shows the results of the factor analysis of the items in Section C that deal with personal practices. Two factors consistently emerge across the three levels of ACRE, albeit with a slightly different combination of items. These factors are **religious practice** and **social responsibility**. Two factors are present only for ACRE2 and ACRE3, named by us as **talking about issues** and **service**. Finally, the **family relationship** factor occurs only for ACRE1 and ACRE3.

Table 2.9 Principal Axis Factor Analysis of Personal Practices: Factors and Loadings

Factor	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
Family Relationships			
At home we talk about God and things that are right and wrong.	.5903		
I talk with my parents or family about religious/moral matters.		Talk	.5956
When possible, I spend some fun time with my family.	.4707	Social	.5229
I talk about serious issues with one or both of my parents.	.4383	Talk	.5155
My family sits down and eats dinner together.	<.3000		.4920
My family prays together at home.	.4788	Service	.3770
I do extra things to make my family life better.	.5242	Social	.3209
Religious Practice			
When I go to Mass, I receive the Eucharist.	.6412	.3920	.6820
I attend Sunday or Saturday evening Mass.	.4710	.5268	.6634
I participate in the sacrament of reconciliation (go to confession).	.4542	<.300	.5002
I spend time in prayer by myself.	Practice	.3264	.5995
When I'm at Mass, I like to pray.	Practice	.4604	.4345
Social Responsibility			
I try to help others who are in need.	.5323	.5727	.6661
I share with and help others at school.		.5365	.5838
I visit a friend or neighbor who is sick or lonely.		.4482	.4330

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Table 2.9 continued

I feel I can talk with friends about any problems I may have.			.4007
My friends and I talk about God and things that are right or wrong.	.5249		
When possible, I spend some fun time with my family.	Family	.4427	
I do extra things to make my family life better.	Family	.4664	Family
I take time to think about rightness and wrongness of actions.	.3658	.4331	
I think about spending one or two years in volunteer work.		.5260	
Talking About Issues			
I talk about serious issues with one or both of my parents.		.5748	.6372
I talk about religious or moral matters with my friends.		.4050	.3906
I talk with my parents or family about religious/moral matters.		.5824	.7685
I feel I can talk with friends or family about any problems I may have.		.4370	
Service			
I think about serving the church as a teacher or in some other form.		.6062	.6929
I think about become a religious sister, brother or priest.		.5669	.6006
I think about spending one or two years in volunteer work.		Social	.4726
My family prays together at home.	Family	.4192	Family

The **family relationships** factor is present on ACRE1 and ACRE3. The factor is defined by items assessing spending time with family, engaging in family prayer, the family eating dinner together, and talking to parents about serious issues. In the analysis of the data from ACRE2, several of the items from this factor load on the **social responsibility**, **talking about issues**, and **service** factors.

The **religious practice** factor, which exists on all three levels of ACRE, constitutes a major variable in this study, used both as a criterion

(dependent) variable and a predictor. The factor consists of components concerning attendance at Mass, reception of the Eucharist, personal prayer and participation in the sacrament of reconciliation. The factor is best defined for ACRE3 on which the items have consistently high loadings. The factor is the most unstable on ACRE1, where only three items loaded, attending Mass, receiving the Eucharist, and going to confession. The items dealing with personal prayer were added to the factor on ACRE1 so that the definition of this factor would be consistent across all levels of ACRE. The reliability of this factor increases from .538 for ACRE1 to .722 for ACRE3.

The **social responsibility** factor exists for all three levels of ACRE, but with a different number of items and with a slightly altered meaning at each level. Only one item, helping others in need, is common to all three levels of ACRE. The factor as defined for ACRE2 has seven items, the largest number among the levels. Here the factor includes sharing at school, visiting the sick, volunteering and being morally responsible in actions. The factor for ACRE2 also includes two items concerning the family, which fall on the **family relationships** factor for ACRE1 and ACRE3. The factor for ACRE3, which has four items, does not include the morally responsible, volunteering and family items, and adds one item concerning talking with friends about problems. The factor for ACRE1 has three items that deal with helping others in need and being morally responsible in actions.

The **talking about issues** factor appears on ACRE2 and ACRE3, but not on ACRE1. The factor measures the frequency with which students talk with their parents and friends about religious or moral matters, serious issues or problems.

The **service** factor, which appears only on ACRE2 and ACRE3, primarily concerns religious vocation and serving the church. These two issues are common to both levels of ACRE. The third item for this factor on ACRE3 deals with volunteering, while the third item for ACRE2 concerns family praying together at home. This latter item was part of the **family relationships** factor on ACRE1 and ACRE3.

Perceptions

The final set of factors comes from the analysis of Section D, perceptions of school, parish and self. Table 2.10 presents the results of this analysis. Four factors emerge: **parish perceptions**, **religion teacher influence**, school perceptions, and student concerns.

Table 2.10 Principal Axis Factor Analysis of Perceptions: Factors and Loadings

Factor	ACRE1	ACRE2	ACRE3
Parish Perceptions			
People in my parish care about me.	.4164	.5227	.7050
People in my parish care about helping others.		.5598	.6219
I belong to an excellent parish and like being a part of it.	.4515	.4022	.5494
Religion Teacher Influence			
My religion teachers have challenged me to think about my faith.	.3807	.4667	.8092
Some religion teachers have been a positive influence on how I think and live.	.3729	.4900	.5032
School /Program Perceptions			
This is a good Catholic school/religion program.	School	.7602	.7731
I'm glad to be in this school/religion program.	School	.7737	.7324
If I were a parent today, I would send my children to this school/program.		.7331	.7127
School provides a lot of opportunity and encouragement to take responsibility.		.6437	.6832
Most teachers here really care about their students.	School	.6466	.6706
Most teachers here are fair in the way they treat students.	School	.5623	.5693
School/program offers a lot of interesting activities outside of class time.		.5862	.5257
Students with drug or alcohol problems can get help here.		.4417	.4908
Teachers here seem to help each other.	School	.4858	.4821
Students here really care about each other.	School	.4827	.4645

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Table 2.10 continued

Teachers here are poorly organized; a lot of class time is wasted.		.3999	.3192
Student Concerns			
I worry a lot about violence.	Concerns	.5863	.7116
I worry a lot about drugs.	Concerns	.5372	.5784
I worry a lot about how my friends treat me.	.5486	.4889	.3939
I worry a lot about one (or both) of my parents.	.4329	.4346	.3566
I worry a lot about how I'm doing in school.	.5475	.4264	.3062

The **parish perceptions** factor occurs on all three levels of ACRE. This factor explores whether the students like their parish and whether they believe the people in the parish care about them. The factor for ACRE2 and ACRE3 contains a third item about whether parishioners care about helping others.

The **religion teacher influence** factor, which is common to all three levels of ACRE, contains two items that deal with religion teachers challenging students to think about their faith and whether these teachers have had a positive influence on the students. The factor is defined better on ACRE3 than on ACRE2 or ACRE1.

The **school/program perceptions** factor contains items about the students' evaluation of their school or religious education program, including the school environment and the effectiveness of the teachers. Although the questions are worded differently, but appropriately, for Catholic school students and those in parish religious education programs, they deal with the same content and issues. The factor has six items on ACRE1 and 11 items for ACRE2 and ACRE3.

The **student concerns** factor contains items that ask the students whether they worry about their parents, drugs, violence, progress in school and how their friends treat them. The factor appears on all three levels of ACRE. The items dealing with violence and drugs become more prominent on the factor as the students get older, whereas the contributions of the items concerning parents, progress in school and friends are similar across the three levels of ACRE.

Summary

The results show that ACRE enjoys excellent technical properties. The items for the religious knowledge domains were developed in a manner that ensures their content validity. In addition, except for the Church domain on ACRE1, the religious knowledge domains all have good internal consistency reliability. Moreover, the reliability of the total religious knowledge score on each level of ACRE is excellent, far exceeding the minimum standard of acceptable reliability. Although only a portion of the vast content possible in the domains of God, Church, Worship, Sacraments, Scripture, Morality, Religious Terms, and Christian Hope is assessed, what ACRE does include is measured very well.

Good to excellent reliability also is evident in the seven defined sentiment domains of ACRE: Relationship with Jesus, Images of God, Catholic Identity, Morality, Student Concerns, Relationship with Others, and Perceptions about School and Parish Religion Programs. A factor analysis indicated that these domains could be subdivided and, in some cases, redefined, resulting in factors that are stronger conceptually with improved technical properties. The benefit of the factor analysis is more evident for ACRE2 and ACRE3 than for ACRE1. More factors emerged on ACRE2 and ACRE3 than on ACRE1 and the resulting domains are more reliable than their counterparts on ACRE1.

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1 This represents the percentage of students who responded "Always/Regularly" to the item "I attend Sunday (Saturday evening) Mass."

CHAPTER THREE

Students' Religious Knowledge

Chapter Overview

Chapters 1 and 2 provided overviews of the criteria essential for catechesis and for empirical research. Chapter 3 now applies these principles and speaks directly to concerns about the students' religious knowledge. As readers well know, the church urges dioceses, schools and parishes to strive to be faithful in their response to Jesus' call to "Go and teach all nations, observing all that I have commanded" (Mt 28:19; GDC #111, p. 106). These criteria have been an ongoing concern within the catechetical community.

When Pope John Paul II was elected to the papacy in 1978, one of his first responsibilities was to summarize and prioritize the deliberations and recommendations of a recently completed International Synod of Bishops. That synod had met to address the church's needs concerning catechesis. The pope fulfilled this responsibility by writing the apostolic letter, *Catechesi Tradendae, On Catechesis in Our Time*, published in 1979. In this landmark document, the pope described the purpose of catechesis as twofold:

> to bring initial faith to maturity and to educate the true disciple of Christ by means of a more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ (# 19).

This dual purpose, to nurture the person's faith so it becomes mature and to nurture religious knowledge so it becomes systematic, continues to be central to the church's catechetical efforts. The recently published *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) reiterates these two purposes that are affirmed in the apostolic letter. Along with striving to promote maturity of the person's faith, the GDC urges that the knowledge conveyed needs to be systematic and, in a special way, needs to emphasize the person and message of Jesus.

Section A of the ACRE surveys gathered information on the students' religious knowledge and Sections B, C and D on the students' faith. Subsequent chapters will summarize what the students said about key aspects of their faith. This chapter reports on the extent of the students' mastery of religious knowledge by considering the findings from two points of view. First, it considers the big picture and reports on the students strengths and weaknesses in seven broad subject areas, the content domains. Second, it examines the specific religious knowledge items within those domains.

Consistent with Pope John Paul II's criteria that the content of catechesis be systematic, the ACRE instruments surveyed students' knowledge in seven traditional content domains: God, Church, Worship, Sacraments, Scripture, Morality and Religious Terminology. See tables 3.5 through 3.11 below to identify the content of each domain. Each of the three ACRE levels asked 49 questions, seven pertaining to each of the above seven domains. The oldest students, completing ACRE3, were asked an additional seven questions concerning Christian hope (eschatology), for a total of 56 questions. For purposes of comparison across the three ACRE levels, this chapter focuses on these seven domains.

A caveat needs to be noted here. Although the purpose of catechesis is to promote "maturity of faith," readers need to keep in mind that the data was gathered not from adults but from children and adolescents. Their grade levels include 5 (ACRE1), 8, 9 (ACRE2), 11 and 12 (ACRE3). The students' ages range from 11 to 18. Readers need to adjust their expectations concerning the students' "maturity" not only for faith but knowledge as well. Given the young age of the students surveyed,

clearly both their knowledge and faith are still maturing and have far to go.

One of the primary purposes of the ACRE instruments is to help catechetical leaders assess the strengths and weaknesses in the students' religious knowledge. As described above, each student received a score from 0 to 7, based on the number of correct answers in each of the seven content areas surveyed by the ACRE instruments. The scores for all the students are listed below in tables 1, 2 and 3 for ACRE levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Students' Religious Knowledge

All of the students responded to seven questions for each of the seven domains, for a total of 49 responses. ACRE3 students alone responded to an additional seven questions concerning hope and eschatology, so comparison with ACRE levels 2 and 1 on this eighth domain was not possible. But by comparing the mean scores for each of the seven religious knowledge content domains a rank order was established for how well the students as a group had performed in each of the seven knowledge domains. This ranking for the youngest children is indicated in table 3.1. The domain listed at the top of the table, ranked number one, indicated the subject matter in which students performed best. Similarly, a last place ranking indicated the subject matter in which students' mean score was lowest.

Table 3.1 - ACRE1 Religious Knowledge Domain Rankings

Rank	Religious Knowledge Domains	Mean Score: Grade 5
1	God	5.45
2	Scripture	5.41
3	Morality	5.38
4	Sacraments	5.29
5	Church	5.16
6	Religious Terms	5.02
7	Worship	4.46

As indicated in table 3.1, ACRE1 students in the fifth grade scored highest (5.45 out of 7.0) in the knowledge domain pertaining to God.

That the students are strongest in the God domain is consistent with the subject matter of their curriculum which focuses on biblical stories about God's actions in one's life. The students scored second highest for the Scripture domain (5.41), a subject matter also given considerable prominence in the curriculum. Scriptures present God the Father as the loving creator; Jesus the Son shares himself in Eucharist and offers forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation. The domain of Sacraments was the third highest mean score for the ACRE1 level. However, some sacraments, such as confirmation, have not yet been covered by most fifth and sixth grade curricula. So a slightly lower mean score of 5.29 in sacraments for this age level is not unexpected and not necessarily a weakness.

The lowest mean score of the seven religious knowledge domains for ACRE1 students was that of Worship. The fact that Worship was seventh should not be seen as a problem. One knowledge domain must necessarily be last. Rather, what may catch the reader's eye is that its mean score was 4.46 out of a possible 7.0. Here again, it is the individual religion teachers and parish catechetical leaders who will want to compare these results with the catechists' expectations for the program's outcomes.

A review of the seven questions listed in the Worship section (see table 3.7) shows that they are strongly focused on the celebration of liturgical seasons, Advent, Lent and Pentecost, and on prayer. Since these are themes central to the curriculum of the primary grades, one must ask why this domain is the weakest of the seven. Although there are probably many contributing factors, here are a few to consider.

Catechists know that the meaning of these seasons, such as Advent and Lent, are easier for children to learn when they are celebrated with concrete symbols and rituals rather than discussed in the abstract. Celebrations in the family and parish communities would seem to be the natural settings. So the children's responses to these ACRE items may be a clear indication that these themes pertaining to Worship need even greater attention, not simply in the classroom, but in the home and parish as well. The children's religious knowledge about liturgy will progress strongly when it is given priority in all three settings in a coordinated manner. This finding may be giving the catechetical community an important message.

Table 3.2 illustrates the mean score rankings of the knowledge domains for ACRE2, the junior high level students. Readers will note

that the right hand column has two mean scores, namely for eighth and ninth grades, respectively, for each of the seven ranking positions.

Table 3.2: ACRE2 - Religious Knowledge Domain Rankings

Rank	Religious Knowledge Domains	Mean Score: Grades 8/9
1	Morality	5.63 / 5.80
2	Sacraments	5.39 / 5.75
3	God	5.38 / 5.60
4	Church	5.03 / 5.40
5	Scripture	4.82 / 5.31
6	Worship	4.73 / 5.10
7	Religious Terms	4.43 / 4.90

One interesting aspect of table 3.2 is that as in all seven of the religious knowledge domains, the ninth grade students consistently performed with higher mean scores than did the eighth grade students. On face value, such higher scores would seem to be a positive finding. However, based on this data, one cannot affirm with certainty that the students "grew" in knowledge between the eighth and ninth grades. Why? Because the sample surveyed these two separate populations in one particular year, namely, the 1994-1995 school year. Any "growth" in knowledge could be determined only if the same population were to be surveyed, and then, one year later, surveyed for a second time.

Nonetheless, most readers will interpret the higher ninth grade scores as quite positive. Clearly, if the ninth grade scores had been lower than the eighth grade scores, there would be much handwringing. Some critics of religious education would have been quick to claim, incorrectly, that there was backsliding evident in the ninth grade students' religious knowledge. But there is no such evidence in these findings.

Review of table 3.2 also indicates that the rank order for all seven domains was identical for both grade levels. ACRE2's eighth and ninth grade respondents scored highest in the knowledge domain pertaining to Morality. This is consistent with the typical junior high syllabus, which deals with a wide range of moral questions, including respect for persons and for all of creation.

The students' second highest scores were in the knowledge domain of Sacraments. Review of the seven questions which define this domain indicates they cover five of the seven sacraments. Information about all of these sacraments is included in the typical curricula of grades one through eight.

The ACRE2 students' third strongest content domain pertained to God and included traditional items concerning Trinity, the Father's plan, Jesus' role in salvation, Jesus as both God and man, particulars about his message and the role of the Holy Spirit. The weakest performance was in the domain of Religious Terms. Yet even here, a positive note can be sounded in that the mean score of the ninth grade students (4.90) was higher than that of the eighth grade students (4.43).

Table 3.3: ACRE3 - Religious Knowledge Domain Rankings

Rank	Religious Knowledge Domains	Mean Score: Grades 11/12
1	Sacraments	5.97
2	Morality	5.52
3	Worship	4.24
4	God	5.16
5	Religious Terms	4.80
6	Scripture	4.38
7	Church	4.32
8	Christian hope	3.87

With regard to the senior high level students who responded to the ACRE3 survey, there was a slight shift in the domain rankings. The 11th and 12th grade students scored highest in the knowledge domain of Sacraments. After 11 years of religious education, the students have typically studied the full range of all seven sacraments. Consistently, this domain, which was third highest for ACRE1, and second for ACRE2, now surfaces for ACRE3 students with the highest mean score.

The ACRE3 students' second and third highest mean scores were for the domains of Morality and Worship. Students' knowledge in the domain of Morality registered a mean score of 5.5 out of a possible 7.0. Table 3.10 below lists the seven questions which constitute that Morality domain. They include items such as the nature of conscience, sin,

the bishop's pastoral letter on war and peace, and the existence of universal moral laws. The questions pertaining to conscience and AIDS received the highest scores, while the question concerning universal moral laws received the lowest score.

Many of the Worship questions spelled out in Table 3.7 pertain to various aspects of the Mass as well as its central importance to Catholics. Other questions pertain to the significance and symbolism of the holy days of Holy Thursday, Easter, and of the risen Christ. At least it is clear the ACRE3 students understand these aspects of the church's worship, even if their behavior, including their Mass attendance percentage, raises questions discussed later in this report.

Table 3.4 shows the rank order of the students' mean scores for each of the seven domains across all three levels of ACRE. Students' religious knowledge was consistently high for three content areas: God, Morality and Sacraments.

For ACRE1 students, Religious Terminology and Worship were the two weakest knowledge domains. For ACRE3 students, Scripture and Church were the two weakest domains, having rank orders of 6 and 7 respectively.

Table 3.4: Ranking of Mean Scores of ACRE Religious Knowledge Domains

Ranking	ACRE1	ACRE2 (eighth)	ACRE2 (ninth)	ACRE3
1	God	Morality	Morality	Sacraments
2	Scripture	Sacraments	Sacraments	Morality
3	Sacraments	God	God	Worship
4	Morality	Church	Church	God
5	Church	Scripture	Scripture	Religious Terms
6	Religious Terms	Worship	Worship	Scripture
7	Worship	Religious Terms	Religious Terms	Church

Table 3.4 above serves as a type of summary in that it presents the rankings for the seven knowledge domains across all levels of ACRE. For the youngest children, ACRE1, their highest mean score was for the

God domain. ACRE2 and ACRE3 students showed highest scores in the domains of Morality and Sacraments, while their God domain scores ranked third highest. But across the three ACRE levels, across grades 5 through 12, the scores for these three domains, God, Morality and Sacraments were consistently high.

The Perspective Across Two Decades

How does the ranking of the ACRE knowledge domains compare with the findings reported in the 1982 NCEA study for the REOI and REKAP inventories? The 1980-81 and 1994-95 survey items were similar to each other in content, although generally not identical. For reporting purposes, the REOI and REKAP religious knowledge questions were clustered by using 10 domains compared with 7 domains used for ACRE. But, on face value, the knowledge domains of the REOI, REKAP and ACRE surveys seem to be somewhat comparable and the ranking results were practically identical.

For eighth and ninth grade students completing the 1980-1981 REOI survey, the three domains which received the highest percentage of correct answers were Sacraments, God and Morality, in that order. For the ACRE2 students surveyed in 1994-1995, the eighth and ninth grade students scored highest in the same three domains, namely, Morality, Sacraments and God, respectively.

For the 11th- and 12th-grade students completing the REKAP survey in 1982, Sacraments and Morality were the two highest ranking domains, the same rank order which was found for the 1994-1995 ACRE3 level students.

This continuity of performance across those 14 years (1980-81 to 1994-95) is not surprising. The curricula and the students' religious needs and their developmental readiness do not seem to have radically changed over that period. There are three key pastoral questions that local catechetical leaders will want to consider. To what extent do these national findings pertaining to the rankings of the seven religious knowledge domains compare with the findings concerning my own students? To what extent do the local findings match the expectations of our local catechetical leaders? How knowledgeable are the students within each domain? The following discussion further explores the question of "progress or decline" not in terms of the seven knowledge domains, but in terms of ACRE's individual religious knowledge questions.

Surveys Suggest Progress with Greater Exposure to Instruction

In the three decades since Vatican II catechists have been implementing the pastoral initiatives recommended by the council. Accordingly evaluation of catechetical programs and textbook materials has been an ongoing concern. Catechetical leaders scrutinize the content of religion textbooks to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as the publication's conformity with the basic content of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Individual parishes and schools, the religion teachers, pastors and program administrators continually assess student progress by monitoring the students' test scores.

With this need for evaluation in mind, contemporary catechetical leaders might well be asking whether in the ACRE findings, there are any indications of progress in the students' religious knowledge from the earlier to the later grade levels. The methodological point has already been made that this NCEA report is based on cross-sectional not longitudinal data. Without the latter — i.e., without students being tested and then the same students tested again at a later date -- the question of the student's growth or decline cannot be adequately answered. But given the importance of such evaluation, there is a feature built into the ACRE surveys which can address this question.

The original designers of ACRE built into the three surveys a number of questions having identical wording. The purpose, in part, was to allow for some comparison among the scores across ACRE levels 1, 2 and 3. With the above methodological qualification in mind, we can report on those religious knowledge items which were designed to allow comparison of student responses across the three ACRE levels. Included in ACRE levels 1 and 2, for example, are 16 questions having identical wording, that is, the same questions appear on both ACRE1 and ACRE2. Similarly, on both ACRE levels 2 and 3 are 20 identical religious knowledge items. These are spread across the seven knowledge domains. Only six questions having identical or near identical wording appear in all three ACRE levels.

Signs of Progress

The findings examined above showed persisting strengths among students in the domains of Sacraments, Morality and God and weaknesses in the domains of Religious Terminology and Church.

This question of students' strengths and weaknesses will now be approached from a different perspective, looking to student responses to individual knowledge items rather than to clusters of related questions, that is to the mean score of the seven item domains. Here the question is: to what extent are there important differences with regard to the students' religious knowledge on individual questions when they appear on several of the four grade levels, from 5th, to 8th, 9th and 12th?

The first of the seven domains asks questions pertaining to the students' knowledge about God. Here there are signs of improvement as students progress from 5th to 8th and 12th grade levels. Readers should refer to Table 3.5 below, which gives the percentage of correct answers for ACRE levels 1, 2 (8th grade), 2 (9th grade) and 3 (12th grade) in the right-hand columns The numbers (1,2,3) which head the four columns on the right of each table refer respectively to the three ACRE levels. The two middle columns further specify if the respondents were in eighth or ninth grades, hence 2-8 and 2-9 head those columns. The numbers in the right-hand columns, below the ACRE level designations, represent the percentage of the students who provided the correct answers. Because table 3.5 presents the God domain questions for all three ACRE levels, there are more than seven questions. Rather, there are 15 questions, from which some combination of seven was used for each ACRE survey. When the same question was used for two or more ACRE surveys, comparisons of the percentage of students who answered correctly can be made.

For example, for ACRE1, fifth grade, only 50 percent of students correctly answered the question concerning Catholics' belief that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. That figure rose to 73 percent and 78 percent by eighth and ninth grades respectively. Similarly, 83 percent of eighth grade students correctly answered that the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' mission, a figure that rose to 84 percent and 90 percent by ninth and 12th-grade, respectively.

By making the assumption that students responding to ACRE3 have received more extensive religious instruction than those responding to ACRE2, and that those responding to ACRE2 have received more instruction than those responding to ACRE1, the above examples and those which follow suggest that the more the students are exposed to religious instruction, the higher is their percentage of correct answers. Further examples, drawn from other religious knowledge domains, are discussed below.

Table 3.5: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE 1	ACRE-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: God	**Percentage of correct answers**			
When Jesus spoke with God, Jesus often called him Father.	77			
Church teaches Jesus is both God and man.	86	86	88	
Catholics believe the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity.	50	73	78	
Jesus' rising from the dead showed he was really God.	70			
Christians believe God came to save us.	91	92	93	
God the Father created all things.	77			
Jesus came to save all people in the world.	93	93	93	
God is the source of creation, still involved with the world.				90
The kingdom of God was a theme central to Jesus' mission.		83	84	90
Jesus' life centered on doing his Father's will.		86	92	93
Jesus is divine and human.				77
The Holy Spirit is identified with inspiration.				69
Trinity means three persons share life as one God.				20
Jesus welcomed sinners during he years of his public ministry.				77
Yahweh means I am who am.		25	32	

In table 3.6 three questions allow comparison concerning the students' knowledge about the Church. From eighth to ninth or twelfth grades, students' percentage of correct answers about the Church as

"missionary," about the hierarchy's teaching authority and about the purpose of the RCIA all improved and did so by approximately 10 percentage points.

Table 3.6: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Church	**Percentage of correct answers**			
Jesus began the Church.	52			
The church celebrates its birthday on Pentecost.	34			
The pope is the leader of the Catholic Church in the world.	83			
Mary is the mother of Jesus and the best model of faith.	96			
We first become members of the Church through baptism.	86			
The twelve followers whom Jesus chose are called apostles.	82	86	91	
Parishes collect for the poor to fulfill the commandment of love.	83			
New adult members come into the Church through R.C.I.A.		52	59	67
Peter was the first head of the Church.		52	56	
Catholics honor Mary chiefly because she is the Mother of God.		85	87	
The pope with the bishops has the highest teaching authority.		83	89	89
A term that describes the church is the people of God.		83	88	
Church as "missionary" means Catholics share good news.		61	70	
Most Protestants disagree that the Holy Spirit guides the pope and bishops.				40

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Table 3.6 continued

Pope John XXIII called for a council to foster renewal in the church.				60
An important debate concerned Jews and Gentiles as disciples.				50
Protestant churches began during the Reformation.				64
God acts in the world and in a special way in the church.				62

With regard to students' knowledge about Worship, 5 of the 14 questions listed in table 3.7 allowed comparison between ACRE2 and ACRE3 results. Four of the five showed gains, with large gains evident in understanding the significance of two feast days: Pentecost (47 percent to 60 percent between fifth and ninth grades) and Holy Thursday (79 percent to 86 percent between fifth and 12th grades).

Table 3.7: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Worship	**Percentage of correct answers**			
On Pentecost, Catholics celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit.	47	57	60	
Jesus gave the Our Father as a model of how to pray.	65			
Mass on Holy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper.	79	80	84	86
Lent is a special time for praying and sacrificing.	65			
On Easter Sunday, Christians celebrate the rising of Jesus.	79			
The season of Advent prepares us for Christmas.	58			
In the Our Father we ask God to forgive us as we forgive those who have hurt us.	53			
During the Liturgy of the Word Scriptures are read.		73	79	84

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Table 3.7 continued

Prayers of petition are offered during the prayer of the faithful.	56	63	76
The lector reads the word of God to the congregation.	87	89	91
We celebrate Jesus' going to heaven on the Ascension feast.	54	66	
The Mass is the most important act of worship for Catholics.	66	69	59
The Immaculate Conception celebrates Mary's freedom from sin.			38
The Easter candle signifies that the risen Christ is with us.			89

One question in this Worship domain showed a decline in the percentage of correct answers, namely, that "Mass is the most important act of worship for Catholics" (66 percent for eighth grade and 69 percent for ninth grade, but 59 percent for 12th grade). This decline seems to be important. It suggests some older students do not understand the central importance of the Eucharistic liturgy. Alternatively, it may suggest some students disagree with the high importance of the Mass as affirmed in the ACRE item.

A further reason catechetical leaders may want to pay attention to the decline in the percentage of correct answers to this question is that it mirrors the decline in attendance at Sunday Mass on the part of the older adolescent and, over the past several decades, by the adult Catholic population. Clearly, this is a question with far-ranging implications, seemingly rooted in the adult community and not exclusively a matter of catechesis for the grade school and high school levels.

Religious knowledge about sacraments, documented in table 3.8, is comparatively high across all three ACRE levels. Here also there are strong indications that the percentage of correct answers increases with the students' greater exposure to religious instruction. Five examples are found in table 3.8:

- Sacraments are a response to God's presence in our lives (70 percent to 89 percent from fifth to 12th grades).
- Purpose of reconciliation (74 percent to 87 percent from fifth to 12th grades).

- Anointing the sick (80 percent to 88 percent from eighth to 12th grades).
- Eucharist (83 percent to 90 percent from eighth to 12th grades).
- Sacraments are Jesus sharing his life with us (64 percent to 78 percent from fifth to eighth grades).

Table 3.8: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Sacraments	**Percentage of correct answers**			
Holy Communion is Christ's body and blood.	93			
Baptism is a sacrament of initiation.	58			
An important part of reconciliation is being sorry for sins.	90			
In a sacrament we respond to God's presence in our lives.	70	80	88	89
We celebrate sacraments because Jesus shares his life with us.	64	74	78	
Catholics confess their sins in the sacrament of reconciliation.	74	82	85	87
The Last Supper was the first celebration of the Eucharist.	80			
Confirmation celebrates the special presence of the Holy Spirit.		67	74	
Holy orders give priests the power to minister.		73	74	
Anointing of the sick strengthens faith of sick people.		80	86	88
Catholics gather in Eucharist to hear God's word and celebrate his presence.		83	90	90
Marriage is a covenant uniting a man and woman in Christ.				93
In holy Communion we receive Christ's actual body and blood.				64
Adoration is not one of the sacraments of the church.				87

With regard to students' knowledge of scripture, table 3.9 shows significant improvements of about 10 percent are evident in the scores of the older students for the following four questions:

- Parable of the Good Samaritan (75 percent to 85 percent from fifth to ninth).
- Jesus' teaching on helping needy (77 percent to 89 percent, fifth to ninth).
- The Bible as inspired (70 percent to 88 percent from eighth to 12th grades).
- Acts of the Apostles (35 percent to 44 percent from eighth to 12th grades).

Table 3.9: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Scripture	**Percentage of correct answers**			
The four Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.	81			
The story of Good Shepherd teaches that God loves and forgives us.	83			
The good Samaritan helped the man on the road to Jericho.	75	80	85	
Mt 25:40 means when we serve others, we serve Jesus.	77	86	89	
The Gospels tell us most about the life and work of Jesus.	76			
The Bible is considered the word of God.	72			
In the story of the prodigal son the father was joyful.	77			
The Bible is a collection of books written under God's inspiration.		70	84	88
Abraham was the father of God's chosen people.		62	78	
The prodigal son teaches that God always offers us forgiveness.		74	78	
Both the Old and New Testaments are the word of God.		74	79	75

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Table 3.9 continued

The Acts of the Apostles tells about the early church.		35	38	44
The letter to the Romans is a New Testament epistle.				58
The lost plow is not one of Jesus' parables.				74
The parable of the laborers in the vineyard and the 11th hour teaches us that God is very generous.				28
New Testament tells about life of Jesus and the early church.				72

With regard to students' knowledge about moral matters, noted in table 3.10, similar increases in correct responses were evident for three questions as students moved up from ACRE1 to ACRE2 and ACRE3:

- Nature of sin (74 percent for fifth, 80 percent for eighth and 86 percent for 12th grades).
- Jesus' greatest commandment (62 percent, 75 percent and 80 percent for fifth, eighth and ninth grades).
- Conscience (76 percent to 85 percent from eighth to 12th grades).

One curious example of a decline in the percentage of correct answers with the older students was in response to the item: We care for the world by respecting it. 93 percent of fifth grade students and 85 percent of eighth grade students agreed with the statement. Because both percentages of correct answers are high, this may not be all that significant. Nonetheless, it may be enlightening for teachers to ask the eighth grade students what they meant by choosing the incorrect response.

Teachers may want to discuss with their students another interesting student response. As noted in this chapter's earlier discussion of the seven religious knowledge domains, the domain of Morality was among the strongest for all three levels of ACRE. All the more curious, then, is the final question listed in table 3.10 concerning universal moral laws, for which only 45 percent of the ACRE3 students provided the correct answer. Perhaps it is due to unfamiliarity or to the high level of abstraction needed to appreciate the meaning of "universal moral laws."

But classroom discussion would help to surface any difficulty in understanding or affirming this traditional principle of Catholic morality.

Table 3.10: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Morality	**Percentage of correct answers**			
Sin is choosing to do what you know is wrong.	74	80	81	86
To follow your conscience means doing what you believe is right.	89			
Keeping holy the Lord's day is participating at Mass on Sunday.	70			
Greatest commandment is to love God and your neighbor.	62	75	80	
The first three of the commandments are about loving God and the last seven are about loving our neighbor.	62			
We care for the world by respecting it.	93	85	88	
For Christians, the purpose of life is to know, love and serve God.	88			
Conscience is a person's ability to judge right and wrong.		76	76	85
Forgive those who trespass against you is not one of the ten commandments.		78	82	
Mature Christians learn their responsibilities and follow their consciences.		93	96	94
Holy people seek to do God's will.		86	89	

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Table 3.10 continued

People with AIDS deserve care and compassion.				93
In the pastoral letter on war and peace, the bishops teach that nuclear bombing of cities is condemned in all circumstances.				62
The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and courage.				87
There are universal moral laws that govern the way we act.				45

The seventh and final domain was that of Religious Terms listed in table 3.11. Even in NCEA's earliest inventories used in the 1970s, this Religious Terms domain typically has been the students' weakest. For the 1994-95 survey, the ACRE2 and ACRE3 students showed a need for greater mastery of the terms *paschal mystery, evangelists* and *ecumenism.* ACRE1 students registered a low score for the term *covenant* as associated with Moses.

On the other hand a high percentage of ACRE2 students did correctly identify the terms: *Trinity*, *abortion* and *adultery*. Also positive is the finding that even for this weak domain of Religious Terms, the percentage of correct responses did rise with the students' grade levels.

In particular, this higher percentage of correct answers associated with the higher grade levels was evident in the correct recognition of the following terms:

- *Trinity* improved from 82 percent to 91 percent from fifth to ninth grades.
- *Covenant* improved from 37 percent to 63 percent to 77 percent from fifth to eighth and ninth grades.
- *Ecumenism* from 35 percent to 45 percent from eighth to 12th grades.

For two religious terms, the percentage correct was low and progress was insignificant.

- *Evangelists* improved from 39 percent to 41 percent from eighth to 12th grades.
- *Paschal mystery* improved from 42 percent to 44 percent from eighth to 12th grades.

With the above seven charts and discussions in mind, the reader is asked to return to the original: For these seven content domains, are there signs of progress in the students' knowledge? Or, properly restated, did the percentage of correct answers increase from the younger to the older students? The above review of the seven domains indicates that the answer is yes. The students' religious knowledge was found to have resulted in higher percentages of correct answers for the students in the higher grade levels. This important sign of progress should be affirmed and not minimalized.

On only one of the 28 questions allowing comparison reviewed above, there was a significant decline of 10 percent in the number answering correctly. That item was: the Mass is the most important act of worship for Catholics. As noted in the above discussion concerning the domain of Worship this question invites considerable reflection. It would be very fruitful for teachers, pastors, parents and students to engage in a discussion about their priorities and expectations for this important question. Teachers and program administrators who are ACRE users, could incorporate this discussion into the determination of their own priorities for how well they expect their students to do.

Table 3.11: Religious Knowledge

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
Content Domain: Religious Terms	Percentage of correct answers			
A saint is a person the church honors because she or he is holy.	97			
Father, Son and Spirit as one God is called the Holy Trinity.	82	87	91	
God's promise to Moses is called the covenant.	37	63	77	
Jesus spoke about the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.	59			
Praying to Mary with special beads is called the rosary.	88			
The tabernacle is where the Eucharist is kept.	77			

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Table 3.11 continued

The leader of a diocese is always a bishop.	61			
Jesus' dying, rising and sending the Spirit is the paschal mystery.		42	51	44
The four Gospel writers are called the evangelists.		39	43	41
Ecumenism is the movement toward unity among Christians.		35	42	45
Adultery is sexual behavior that violates marriage vows.		89	92	
Abortion is ending a pregnancy that results in the death of the unborn child.		89	93	
Communion of Saints includes those alive and those who have died in God's company.				68
Catechumens are those studying and preparing for baptism.				71
The Incarnation is Jesus' coming to earth as one of us.				51
Grace is a free gift of God's own life that gives strength.				68

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings pertaining to the students' religious knowledge, and to use the data to speak to questions of special interest to the church's religion teachers and other catechetical leaders.

A key question for those responsible for the religion program is: In what knowledge areas are students strongest and weakest?

With regard to students' strengths, we found the students' religious knowledge was consistently high for three content areas throughout the three levels of ACRE, from the 5th through the 12th grades. Students'

mean scores indicated that they were most knowledgeable in the areas pertaining to God, Morality and Sacraments.

The students' weakest domain was that of religious terms, a finding which has persisted since NCEA began using assessment inventories in the late 1970s. Although a high percentage of students did correctly identify the terms *trinity, abortion* and *adultery*, other terms such as *covenant, paschal mystery* and *ecumenism* were less familiar. The percentage of correct responses, however, did rise with the students' grade levels.

A second question frequently raised by those responsible for the religion programs in school and parishes is: Are there signs of progress or decline as the students pass into the higher grade levels?

Generally speaking, the greater the students' exposure to religious instruction as implied by their participation in the higher grade levels, the higher their percentage of correct answers. Therefore, student progress in religious knowledge is a qualified yes given that this study is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal.

With that methodological qualification in mind, this chapter reported on the knowledge items having identical wording and compared the findings across the three ACRE levels. ACRE levels 1 and 2 had 16 questions with identical wording. ACRE levels 2 and 3 had 20 identical religious knowledge questions.

In almost every one of these comparisons, as explained in detail above, as student grade levels rose, so did the percentage of the students' correct answers.

An examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the students' religious knowledge domains, and a comparison of the students' performance on identical knowledge items as they appear across the ACRE levels have provided reasons for hope and a few challenges needing to be addressed.

It is crucial that religion teachers who regularly use ACRE take the findings for their own students and compare them with the faculty's predetermined expectations for how well they thought their students would perform on the ACRE survey. Any differences or surprises in the students' performance can lead to a fruitful discussion with the religion faculty members, students, parents, principal and pastor.

The recently published *General Directory for Catechesis* suggests that by means of this type of dialogue between youth and adults, the children's religious awakening is "deepened all the more" and the children

will be better able to appropriate the Christian message into their daily lives (#226).

For further insights into how ACRE respondents incorporated the Christian message into their lives, chapter 4 reports on findings pertaining to the students' religious beliefs, practices and perceptions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Students' Religious Beliefs, Practices and Perceptions

The church's contemporary documents and papal directives reviewed in Chapter 1 have described the task of catechesis as a constant effort to translate the word of God so it is accessible to all persons and can become accepted in individuals' thinking and in their lives.[1] Ultimately, catechesis is intended to help individuals come into "communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ" (*Catechesi Tradendae*,#5; CCC #426; GDC #80). Clearly, this goal presumes the students have learned the basic information central to Christ's life and Gospel message. The sharing of this knowledge is necessary for fulfilling Christ's command that his disciples teach all nations. Chapter 3 presented the ACRE findings with regard to students' strengths and weaknesses in seven key content domains of religious knowledge.

Essential as this religious knowledge is, the church has a broader vision and responsibility. "Communion and intimacy with Jesus" calls the community beyond an exclusive concern for the transfer of religious knowledge. Rather, this papal directive that catechesis aim toward

"communion and intimacy" with Christ requires that all responsible persons also be strongly concerned with nurturing the students' religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. The young person's beliefs and relationships with God, with the church community, family and the broader social communities are central to the catechetical program.

Catechetical leaders hope that the religion program will shape the students' religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. These sentiments, in turn, shape and foreshadow how effective the catechetical program will be.

The following 20 tables provide an item by item overview of what the ACRE respondents told us about their beliefs, practices and perceptions. The students' responses to 113 statements have been grouped into 20 clusters, each containing items of similar content. An umbrella phrase or theme, such as Images of God or Relationship with Jesus, is on the first line of the tables and is intended to help the reader identify the common theme of the items to which the students were responding.

The numbers 1, 2 and 3 which head the columns on the right of each table refer respectively to the three ACRE levels. The two middle columns further specify if the respondents were in eighth or ninth grades, hence 2-8 and 2-9 head those columns. The numbers in the right-hand columns, below the ACRE level designations represent the percentage of the students who provided the preferred answers. So the tables in this chapter are unlike those of chapter 3, whose numbers indicate the percentage of students who provided the correct answers. The percentages in the tables of this chapter do not always indicate those students who agreed with the statements as such, but rather those who agreed with the church's traditional beliefs or who responded in the way the catechetical community would see as the preferred manner.

The following pages present what the students told us in regard to their religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. Tables 4.1 through table 4.8 describe what students believe, whereas the later tables describe what they practice with regard to prayer, sacraments and other actions. Further, these tables simply present the students' responses to questions which have been clustered together thematically. These themes are not to be confused with factors whose construction is explained in Chapter 2 and which are a statistical refinement of the themes. The results of that more technical analysis are described in Chapter 6.

Review of Students' Beliefs

Church documents have consistently emphasized that students need to come to know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "Knowing" God, of course, has a cognitive aspect, intellectual knowledge, as well as an affective aspect. The reader will want to recall the findings presented in Chapter 3, which reported strengths and weaknesses in the students' intellectual knowledge about the three divine persons who constitute the Trinity. Strengths predominated. Table 3.5, for example, indicated that 93 percent of students did understand that Jesus came to save all people, that Jesus' life centered on doing his Father's will (93 percent), that Jesus is both God and man (77 percent) and that the Holy Spirit is identified with inspiration (69 percent). The weakest finding was that only 20 percent correctly affirmed that Trinity meant the three persons shared life as one God. So, the ACRE survey of the students' religious knowledge of the Trinity suggests strengths in understanding the roles of the three divine persons and room for further learning, such as the Father, Son and Spirit sharing one divine nature.

Two factors of the students' beliefs, images of God and relationship with Jesus, are reported here.

Images of God

The findings for all three levels of ACRE indicate that today's youth are calling out for greater religious know-how. Specifically, more than 7 of every 10 students said they wanted to learn more about how to get closer to God (see table 4.1). Catechesis, whose goal is to help people come into communion and intimacy with Christ, speaks directly to these students' desire. The adult community, and particularly those associated with the schools and parish programs, are challenged to respond to the majority of students who have expressed this hunger for greater religious know-how. This open invitation from the students asking for help is a reason for hope and also poses a serious challenge to the entire adult community. This challenge implies that catechesis is best accomplished by an adult community which is itself actively engaged in learning how to be closer to God.

The students' beliefs concerning their images of God, reported in table 4.1 below, indicate that the students do have a receptive disposition. For example, four of five students said that they have a positive image of God, seeing him as a "loving parent" with whom they "will live. . .in heaven."

Table 4.1: Beliefs: Images of God

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
God is a strict judge.	30	43	44	46
God speaks to us through the Bible.	73	84	82	85
Sometimes I feel God pays no attention to me.	39	52	59	60
God is like a loving parent.	84	85	85	80
If I do a lot of wrong, God will stop loving me.	14	20	19	20
Someday I'm going to live with God in heaven.	79	84	85	80
I would like to learn how to get closer to God.	73	73	74	72
At times I feel that God does not care about me.		15	15	51

This cluster of beliefs also showed signs of ambiguity, often found in adolescents. Along with student confidence in God, a large percentage of students, 49 percent, failed to reject the statement that they sometimes "feel that God does not care" about them. Also, four out of five students seem to believe that God's love for them will cease "if I do a lot of wrong," thereby indicating that the majority do not believe God loves them unconditionally. This question of the nature of God's love could foster an excellent discussion with students who said they wanted to know how to get closer to God, particularly older students and perhaps adults as well. Earlier research by Father Andrew Greeley reported many adult Catholics believe that entrance into heaven was earned by the person's good deeds. They did not see salvation as God's gift. So this problem found with all three levels of ACRE students is neither new nor limited to adolescents.

Relationship with Jesus

In regard to the students' relationship with Jesus, the good news is that, on average, more than 7 of 10 students affirmed the ACRE

statements: that "Jesus really understands me" and that their "friendship with Jesus really helps" them (table 4.2) That percentage remained constant across all three levels of ACRE.

Students' responses to two additional statements were even more positive. More than 4 out of 5 students affirmed the statements that they looked upon Jesus "as my savior and friend," and that they considered themselves "a follower of Jesus."

Table 4.2: Beliefs: Relationship with Jesus

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I look upon Jesus as my Savior and friend.	86	87	85	82
Jesus cured the blind and raised he dead.	69	77	78	77
My friendship with Jesus really helps me.	75	76	73	72
Jesus is both divine and human.	70	78	78	80
I am a follower of Jesus.	80	85	85	83
I feel Jesus really understands me.	71	74	73	68

Since one in five students did not affirm that Jesus is both divine and human, it would be helpful for catechists, pastors and parents to ask students about their images of God and their basis for rejecting this key doctrine of Jesus' divinity and humanity.

Earlier NCEA findings (1982) have shown that the extent to which students relate to Jesus is absolutely central to their acceptance of other religious beliefs and practices. When students said they had a relationship with Jesus, they were much more likely to affirm traditional beliefs, to say they prayed and participated in the sacraments. So to say that catechesis must be "Christo-centric" is not only theologically correct, but also highly practical.

It is encouraging to learn from this study that these ACRE students have a genuine care for Jesus and, as noted above with regard to students' images of God, a hunger for greater closeness to him.

Catechetical leaders, it seems, can do no better than to continue to make their strong support of the students' relationship with Jesus a priority.

Catholic Identity

The ACRE survey also contained a cluster of eight belief statements, here called *Catholic Identity*. This cluster has particular importance as a predictor of the students' knowledge and religious practices. Chapter 6 explains this special significance, which becomes evident from a statistical analysis of the data. For the purposes of this chapter, however, a simple exposition of the findings reported in table 4.3 will suffice.

A positive finding concerning this cluster of the ACRE beliefs was that the students' responses were generally favorable. Typical, for example, was that, on average, four of every five students say that "being Catholic is important to me." This belief was consistent across all three levels of ACRE. However, a question worthy of discussion with students is what the majority meant when they affirmed their Catholic identity. When they hear the term "Catholic," for example, what comes to their minds? Conversely, when the one in five students says "being Catholic" is not important, what are they thinking of and declining to affirm?

"Jesus is really present in the Eucharist" is another item which catechists and program leaders will want to examine and discuss, since three out of every four students said they believed it. This level of belief (74 to 75 percent) remained constant for all three levels of ACRE. Such constancy is unexpected given the differences one frequently finds in the behaviors and attitudes of ACRE1's 5th-grade students as distinct from ACRE3's 12th-grade students. Greater attention will need to be paid to how the affirmation of this belief fits with the other related elements of the students' religious beliefs and practices, including their experience of prayer, relationships with Jesus, parish and family, as well as the students' participation in or non-attendance at the Sunday Eucharist.

Table 4.3: Beliefs: Catholic Identity

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I believe that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist	74	75	74	75
I like to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.	52	59	55	48
Being Catholic is important to me.	84	87	82	79
Going to Mass is important to me.	74	71	63	63
Mary, the mother of Jesus, is important to me.	84	75	74	67
It makes sense for someone to enter religious life.	65	59	62	68
Receiving confirmation is important to me		80	73	74
I would like to learn more about my religion.		68	69	63

One troubling finding common to ACRE levels 1 through 3, that is, from the 5th and 6th grade levels to the 11th and 12th, is a gradual decline in the percentage of students who affirmed six of the above eight statements pertaining to Catholic identity. The declines were in the range of a few percentage points and included beliefs concerning the importance of Mass, confirmation, reconciliation, being Catholic, closeness to Mary and a desire to learn more about their religion. The declines are consistent with the observation that older adolescents participate less frequently in the Mass and in parish religious education programs. Therefore the decline in Catholic identity is not a surprise, but it remains a very important issue which warrants further monitoring and discussion.

The ACRE data suggests one contributing element of this decline: by the time students reach the senior high level, they may have begun to separate their beliefs about Jesus, which are consistently strong (see table 4.2), from their weakening beliefs about their Catholic identity

and their "religion" (table 4.3). The students' friendship with Jesus (72 to 76 percent, table 4.2) and desire to learn how to be close to God (72 to 74 percent, table 4.1) were fairly strong and consistent across all three levels of ACRE. However, the same level of strength and consistency is not present with regard to students' affirmation of the majority of these statements pertaining to Catholic identity.

Examples of this divergence between the students' beliefs about Jesus and their beliefs about their Catholic identity may be showing up in the modest percentage declines in several of the Catholic identity beliefs. The percentage of students who said going to Mass was important to them declined from 74 percent among ACRE1 students to 63 percent among ACRE3 students. Other declines were smaller, in the 5 percent range, including students who said they "would like to learn more about their religion," the importance of their receiving confirmation and their liking to celebrate reconciliation (4 percent). This separation between the students' beliefs about Jesus and their perceived importance of aspects of their identification with the institutional church may represent the beginning of a weakening in the fabric of Christ's seamless garment.

Further insights into the students' approach to their Catholic identity are noted in the review of students' perceptions of their parish and of their catechetical programs in tables 4.14 and 4.20.

Morality

The ACRE inventories surveyed students' beliefs in five areas pertaining to morality: personal actions, drugs, equality, social relations and sexuality. Although the adult community strongly desires students to give the preferred answer 100% of the time, it's clear that these students are still developing their moral principles and practices, and that further work is needed.

The most encouraging findings were that almost 9 of 10 students affirmed the equality of persons, regardless of gender (table 4.5). Similarly, four out of five affirmed the Gospel's and church's teaching on social justice toward all, regardless of race and national origin. Approximately 4 out of 5 students affirmed compassion toward poor nations, toward the hungry and those with AIDs (table 4.7).

The areas most in need of attention pertained to students' beliefs about certain personal actions. Fewer than half of ACRE2's junior high

school students rejected the statement that it was OK for people their age to drink alcohol at parties (table 4.6). The senior high students responded more responsibly, with more than 6 in 10 saying it was not OK for them to drink alcohol at a party.

Another concern is that some students' responses showed signs of moral pragmatism. Only 3 in 10 junior high students rejected lying (table 4.4). A similarly low percentage of junior and senior high students rejected the wrongness of copying during a test.

With regard to drugs, only approximately one in four junior high students affirmed that drug use was harmful. Similarly the vast majority of junior and senior high students failed to condemn the experimental use of drugs, to try drugs "once or twice" (table 4.6).

Catechists, parents and pastors are well aware of the pain and destruction caused by these moral attitudes. So these ACRE findings lend confirmation to what have been widely known as major problems within some communities.

Similar problems were evident in the area of sexual practices. Approximately half the junior and senior high students, on average, rejected the wrongness of sexual intercourse outside of marriage (table 4.8) and two-thirds failed to condemn the harm caused by such sexual relations. These findings suggest that the low moral standards of the culture is a serious challenge to the Christian moral values presented by the Church's catechesis. Six in ten students condemned abortion as immoral (table 4.8). The slightness of this majority (64 percent) may be surprising given the very high priority church leaders and grass root parishioners typically give to respect for prenatal life. A second statement, condemning abortion even in cases of serious hardship, found even less support, with only half the ACRE3 students affirming the value of life. The findings for these two right-to-life statements deserve their own table but were combined with the sexuality statements in table 4.8 in that sexuality and abortion are each concerned with respect for life.

Discussion with students, to discover their thinking and reasoning in all these areas pertaining to morality, will provide the catechetical community with additional support and allow all parties involved to work together and build a stronger framework for further moral catechesis. Part of these problems would seem to be rooted in the developmental process, in the shift from immaturity to maturity. However, it is not out of the question that these youths' moral attitudes are a reflection of the moral attitudes of the adult community, of the broader

American society. The extent of the challenges with regard to these students' moral beliefs is nothing less than ominous.

Table 4.4: Beliefs: Morality – Personal Actions

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Wrong to take an item from a store without paying for it.	91	85	85	83
OK to tell a lie to keep from getting into trouble.	15	33	32	42
Copying during a test is one student helping another.	11	26	22	34
OK to lie as long as I don't get caught.	9	29	29	

Table 4.5 : Beliefs: Morality – Equality

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
A girl can be as effective a leader as a boy.	78	86	88	87
Women and men can be equally effective spiritual leaders.		85	84	86
Men and women should be treated equally in their jobs.		92	91	92

Table 4.6: Beliefs: Morality – Drugs

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
OK to try drugs once or twice.	11	27	36	34
Drugs are not as harmful as most people say they are.		22	30	
OK for people my age to drink alcohol at a party.		32	43	64

Table 4.7: Beliefs: Morality – Social

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
People suffering from hunger are a real concern for me.		75	78	77
OK to exclude some because of race or national background.		12	13	14
Rich countries should help poor countries.		81	81	76
Feel sad about people who get sick with AIDs.		83	84	84
Concerned about the amount of violence in the world.		83	88	86

Table 4.8: Beliefs: Morality – Sexual

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Sexual intercourse outside of marriage is wrong.		53	53	43
Important to wait until marriage before having sex.		53	56	45
No one really gets hurt by sexual relations between teens.		35	28	35
OK for couple to live together before being married.				82
Abortion is immoral, even in cases of serious hardship.				50
I believe abortion is wrong.				64

The above tables also indicate a number of positive moral values: more than four out of every five ACRE3 students affirmed the wrongness of stealing (table 4.4), all three statements concerning the equality of the sexes (table 4.5), and compassion for those with AIDs and those who experience violence (table 4.7). These findings indicate the presence of moral convictions on which strengths parents, pastors and catechists can continue to build the students' moral catechesis. More will be said about these moral issues in the remaining chapters.

Review of Students' Personal Practices

The ACRE surveys asked about four areas of the students' personal practices: family, religion, social responsibilities and service. What follows reports on several of these practices.

Family Relationships.

Earlier NCEA research (1982) reported finding that close family relationships were strongly associated with the extent to which students accepted traditional beliefs and practices. The stronger the family life reported by the students, the more likely students would be to answer religious knowledge questions correctly, and to affirm religious beliefs and to engage in traditional religious practices.

Students' responses in the 1994-95 survey to six ACRE statements pertaining to their family practices are reported in table 4.9. In general, as the ages of students increased from ACRE levels 1 to 3, the strength of their participation in family activities declined. At the level of ACRE1 three of five of these youngest respondents said their family sat down together for dinner. Four of 10 said they talked with parents about serious issues and 6 of 10 said they spent some fun time with their family (table 4.9). However, by the time students were in senior high, as reflected in the ACRE3 responses, the extent of these family activities, based on the percentages shown in table 4.9, had declined by at least a third.

Table 4.9: Personal Practices: Family Relationships

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I do extra things to make my family life better.	32	19	23	20
My family sits down and eats dinner together.	61	48	48	42
When possible, I spend some fun time with my family.	62	33	32	27
At home we talk about God and right and wrong.	19	10	15	16
My family prays together at home.	23	10	10	9
I talk to my parents about serious issues.	43	22	25	25

Given that the family is the place where the child's religious values are first nurtured, any sign of decline in its members' interactions should be a major concern for catechetical leaders. Chapter 6 and the conclusions will say how family relationships contribute to the students' religious formation. More will be said about this family relationships factor in the following chapters.

Students' Religious Practices

Eucharist and Prayer. The *General Directory for Catechesis* states that "faith demands to be known, celebrated, lived and translated into prayer" (#84, p. 74). This succinct summary of the four pillars of catechesis also suggests that these four dimensions have an organic wholeness, an integrity which ACRE findings help to discover within the students' responses, as is evident in the following reports.

Slightly more than half the students reported they regularly attended Sunday Eucharist. This percentage is low when compared with that reported in prior decades. The earlier NCEA study (1982, p. 47) reported 81 percent of senior high students said they attended regularly. Yet the average of 52 percent attendance reported by ACRE students in 1994-95 is practically twice the 27 to 28 percent Mass attendance figures which several surveys reported for the Catholic adult population in 1993-94.

Of the ACRE students who said they regularly attended Eucharist, almost 8 in 10 said that when at Mass, they usually received Communion. Those figures remained fairly high, between 86 and 77 percent, across all three ACRE levels.

Readers will recall the church documents which describe catechesis as bringing individuals into "communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ." It seems appropriate then to ask: Are these Eucharistic experiences prayerful for the students? Three in five of the younger children said the Eucharistic celebrations were prayerful, whereas only two in five senior high students, responding to ACRE3, said they liked to pray during Mass (table 4.10).

This finding is consistent with students' response to a related question about the extent to which they prayed in general. Approximately one in three of all the ACRE respondents said they spent "some time praying by myself" (see table 4.10). This finding concerning prayer should be examined within the context of the overall fabric of the students' religious beliefs and practices. It seems to invite catechetical

leaders to discern how the students' practice of prayer fits with broader trends in their religious practices. Chapter 6 will provide some insights along these lines. But in this question of prayer, it would be useful to catechists to be aware of possible shifts in students' religious practices over time. As a case in point, earlier NCEA findings (1982) reported that 53 percent of senior high students said they often or occasionally "pray by myself." That figure, when compared with the 32 percent reported in table 4.10 for ACRE3 students in 1994-95 who said they spend some time praying by themselves, suggests another area that needs attention from the adult community. If indeed there has been a decline in prayer, it is no wonder students report a hunger for greater religious know-how and for becoming closer to God, as discussed above.

One way to begin to address this challenge is for catechetical leaders to gather pastors, parents, students and religion teachers to assess what is happening in their local parishes and, importantly, why. This does not seem to be simply an isolated problem of declining Mass attendance, significant as that is in itself. Rather, earlier research and findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that the fabric of the students' religious sentiments and behavior includes many interwoven threads such as the students experiences with God, with the parish and family members. The students' religious sentiments stem from and impact on their families and the adult community both inside and outside the Catholic community.

The findings of the ACRE study show fairly strong correlations between religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. The findings suggest that the students' behavior is part of a close-knit fabric of religious beliefs and relationships that provides a context for comprehensively assessing the meaning of the findings for specific beliefs and practices. This statistical analysis provides results consistent with common sense. Prayer, for example, has been traditionally defined as conversation with God. So it makes sense that as parent-child activities and conversation seem to decline in frequency as children grow older (see table 4.9), students appear to be less skilled when speaking with God in general and when gathered around the Eucharistic table. Students would also bring less religious know-how to their encounters with Christ in the sacraments.

Studies with adult populations point to a wide range of other contributing factors such as a general decline in the credibility of

religious leadership and a general decline in respect for authority. How these factors may or may not be part of the problem can be included in the discussion in the parish, the school and the entire church community when addressing this issue of youths' practices concerning Eucharist and prayer.

One principle this study underscores is that family life is the source and nurturer of religious values and practices. But there is no evidence that the students' religious values derive only from the family. A balanced approach is called for in interpreting these ACRE findings which show a number of areas needing greater collaboration among the church community, parents, catechists and pastors alike.

Table 4.10: Personal Practices - Religious Practices

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I attend Sunday (Saturday evening) Mass.	51	52	53	51
When I go to Mass, I receive the Eucharist.	86	84	86	77
When I'm at Mass, I like to pray.	59	43	41	43
I participate in the sacrament of reconciliation.	40	23	19	12
I spend some time praying by myself.	37	27	31	32

Social Responsibilities and Services

The following two tables (4.11 and 4.12) list the ACRE survey items pertaining to social responsibilities and service, respectively. In both areas, the percentage of students providing the preferred responses suggests plenty of room for maturation.

Approximately 4 in 10 ACRE3 students say that they help others at school and help others who are in need (table 4.11). But few say they visit the sick or lonely (18 percent) or talk with friends about God and matters of right and wrong (20 percent). When it comes to the rightness and wrongness of their own actions, almost 4 in 10 say they think about it regularly or occasionally. This suggests that for 6 out of every 10 students, moral reflectiveness and discernment are not part of their

regular experience, even though both are central to the students' moral and social responsibilities.

Table 4.11: Personal Practices - Social Responsibilities

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I try to help others who are in need.	50	36	32	43
I think about the rightness and wrongness of my actions.	36	28	26	37
My friends and I talk about God and right and wrong.	8	14	9	20
I share with and help others at school.		39	35	42
I visit a friend or neighbor who is sick or lonely.		17	17	18
I can talk with friends or family about my problems.		39	36	44

If anyone wondered about the decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, table 4.12 provides insight to part of the puzzle. Extremely few (3 percent) senior high students said they thought about becoming priests or religious.

In the Catholic identity discussion (see table 4.3), 68 percent of ACRE3 students affirmed the statement: "It makes sense for someone to enter religious life." The majority of students are not antagonistic to the idea of religious life as such. Presumably, by the senior high level, they have had at least some positive experiences of loving and dedicated members of religious congregations and of the diocesan priesthood. These findings raise more questions than they answer. But they at least provide an opportunity for interested persons to begin or continue a dialogue with other members of the community about these issues.

Table 4.12: Personal Practices - Service

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I think about becoming a priest or religious.		2	3	3
I think about donating some time for volunteer work.		14	15	12
I think about serving the Church as a teacher or other way.		9	9	12

Review of Student's Perceptions

Student Concerns

The students' concerns cluster is a set of five statements (table 4.13) which are difficult to interpret because they contain certain built-in ambiguities. For example, the phrase which begins all five statements, "I worry a lot about. . . " has no scale for determining when the student's worry is healthy or when it is dysfunctional.

What does it mean, for example, when 7 of 10 students say they worry a lot about their parents? Or when 7 of 10 say they worry about violence? Or when about half say they worry about drugs? What expectations do catechists have with respect to how students will or should respond? "Preferred answers" here means the percent who said they do worry.

Another approach welcomes this ambiguity. On the one hand, it is somewhat touching that 7 in 10 students worry about their parents. But it is very important for parents to know what it is about them, as parents, that makes their children worry. These five ACRE items can be used in the parish, school and family as springboards to open discussion with youths about these worries, and other concerns about which they may want to talk. These items may provide an excellent pastoral opportunity to build bridges between the worlds of students and adults.

It seems appropriate for adults to come to the students, and, in all honesty, ask for their help in interpreting what it means when they say they worry about parents, drugs and violence. Similarly, adults have

here an important opportunity to help youths. The challenge will be for the adults to raise these questions gently and respectfully, especially in the sensitive area of how the students feel they are being treated by their friends. It seems crucial for adults to help students clarify the sources of their concerns about violence and then to develop appropriate strategies.

Table 4.13: Perceptions - Student Concerns

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I worry a lot about my parents.	63	69	68	69
I worry a lot about drugs.	54	53	50	44
I worry a lot about violence.	60	70	70	68
I worry a lot about how my friends treat me.	48	70	74	69
I worry a lot about how I am doing in school.	69	83	88	85

The Parish and Catholic School

"The parish is, without doubt, the most important *locus* in which the Christian community is formed and expressed" (GDC #257, p. 237). This statement from the *General Catechetical Directory* echoes Pope John Paul II's *Catechesi Tradendae* (#67c) conviction, which he frequently expressed, that the parish needs to be a "welcoming family." This welcoming is needed to assure the success of the catechetical endeavor.

Catechetical leaders recognized the importance of the students' social settings and their impact on the effectiveness of catechesis. Accordingly, they asked that the 1992 revision of the ACRE survey instruments incorporate additional questions concerning students' views on the parish, the Catholic school, the characteristics of the parish or Catholic school catechetical program, and the influence of the religion teachers.

What follows are the students' responses, gathered into seven clusters of items (tables 4.14 through 4.20) documenting the students' perceptions of these important catechetical settings.

One of the highlights of this section is the report that approximately three of every four students saw their parish as a place where people did care about helping others, although only one in two students saw the parishioners as caring about them in particular (table 4.14).

Table 4.14: Perceptions - Parish

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
I belong to an excellent parish and like being a part of it.	70	71	67	58
People in my parish care about me.	59	61	55	47
People in my parish care about helping others.		76	71	71

A majority of students affirmed that their religion teachers, both in parish catechetical programs and in Catholic schools, did influence them positively and did challenge them to think about their faith (table 4.15). Readers may want to note that in order to gain an overview of students' perceptions of their religion teachers, regardless of whether it be in the Catholic school or parish setting, table 4.15 is the average resulting from combining tables 4.16 and 4.17.

Table 4.15: Perceptions - Teachers' Influence

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Some of my religion teachers have been a positive influence.	53	64	64	64
My religion teachers have challenged me to think about my faith.	53	63	62	66

Table 4.16: Perceptions - Catholic School Teachers' Influence

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Some of my religion teachers have been a positive influence.	55	69	69	67
My religion teachers have challenged me to think about my faith.	56	68	64	69

Table 4.17: Perceptions - Parish Program Teachers' Influence

	ACRE 1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Some of my religion teachers have been a positive influence.	51	59	52	57
My religion teachers have challenged me to think about my faith.	51	59	56	60

Seven of every 10 students affirmed that they were in a good religion program and that their religion teachers really cared about them (table 4.18). Again, as with table 4.15 above, table 4.18 gives a composite portrait of both the students' perceptions of the Catholic school and parish programs.

Tables 4.19 and 4.20, as with tables 4.16 and 4.17, retain the distinctions between the two settings.

One challenge that exists for both settings is that only half of the ACRE3 students said the students cared about one another (tables 4.18, 4.19 and 4.20). The positive news is that this is significantly higher than the degree of caring expressed at the earliest level, ACRE1, at which approximately one in three said the "students here really care about each other."

Table 4.18: Perceptions - School or Parish Religion Program

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Teachers here seem to help each other.	72	69	65	73
This is a good Catholic school/ religion program.	75	71	76	70
I'm glad to be in this school/ religion program.	65	62	69	64
Teachers here really care about their students.	72	71	72	69
Teachers here are fair in the way they treat students.	63	66	67	65
Students here really care about each other.	32	47	52	50
Teachers here are poorly organized.		39	36	40
School provides opportunity for and encourages student responsibility.		63	70	66
If I were a parent, I would send my children to this school.		57	65	61
School offers a lot of interesting activities outside class.		42	65	57
Students with drug or alcohol problems can get help here.		31	36	38
Religion program encourages volunteer work.	46	64	69	68

Table 4.19: Perceptions - Catholic School Program

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Teachers here seem to help each other.	83	79	70	78
This is a good Catholic school.	82	78	82	73
I'm glad to be in this school.	72	66	76	67
Teachers here really care about their students.	78	78	75	71
Teachers here are fair in the way they treat students.	60	63	70	61
Students here really care about each other.	37	56	58	49
Teachers here are poorly organized.		33	29	38
School provides opportunity for and encourages student responsibility.		70	76	69
If I were a parent, I would send my children to this school.		55	70	61
School offers a lot of interesting activities outside class.		48	77	65
Students with drug or alcohol problems can get help here.		26	40	37
Religion program encourages volunteer work.	50	64	73	67

Table 4.20: Perceptions - Parish Religion Program

	ACRE1	ACRE2-8	ACRE2-9	ACRE3
	Percentage of preferred answers			
Teachers here seem to help each other.	63	60	53	62
This is a good religion program.	68	64	61	61
I'm glad to be in this religion program.	59	58	50	57
Teachers here really care about their students.	66	65	61	65
Teachers here are fair in the way they treat students.	66	69	61	74
Students here really care about each other.	27	37	38	52
Teachers here are poorly organized.		45	55	45
Program provides opportunity for and encourages student responsibility.		57	53	59
If I were a parent, I would send my children to this program.		58	52	61
Program offers a lot of interesting activities outside class.		37	32	41
Students with drug or alcohol problems can get help here.		35	25	40
Religion program encourages volunteer work.	43	65	66	71

Conclusion

The catechetical faculties of parishes and Catholic schools will want to review these figures (tables 4.16 through 4.20) which represent a sampling from across the country. However, close attention to the perceptions of their own students would seem to have a significant payoff for religion teachers as they continue their efforts to make their parish and school the "welcoming family" which the church's catechetical documents encourage.

The leadership of Catholic parishes and schools will want to notice that more than 6 of every 10 students said they were glad to be in the

Catholic school or parish religion program (table 4.18). This fits with the fact that the majority (69 percent) of students said the "teachers here really care about their students." These and other items in tables 4.18 through 4.20 suggest that the majority of these students do feel connected to their school and parish catechetical program.

There is a growing body of religious, educational and medical research mentioned elsewhere in this report which highlights the importance of students having trusting relationships, especially with their parents. In addition, the importance of peer relationships continues to be documented in numerous research reports. These feelings of connectedness among students, family and catechists have a crucial impact on the effectiveness of the catechetical endeavor. They are powerful contributors to the weaving of Christ's seamless garment, and they are integral to the "communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ" which Pope John Paul II described as the aim of catechesis.

The impact of this connectedness and further examples of factors which contribute to successful catechesis will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

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1 Pope John Paul II, "Message to Cardinal Jose T. Sanchez," September 20, 1994, on the occasion of the 1994 Plenary Session of the International Council for Catechesis, published originally in *l'Osservatore Romano* (October 5, 1994) and reprinted in *Living Light*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Spring 1995, pp. 69-71 at p. 70.

CHAPTER FIVE

Relationships Are Central to Religious Value Development

The first four chapters of this report have examined respectively:

- The principles which undergird catechesis
- The content and characteristics of the ACRE instruments and the research method used for surveying the students
- The findings concerning the students' religious knowledge
- The findings concerning the students' religious beliefs, practices and perceptions.

There is an important consistency within these chapters that readers will not want to miss. The first chapter's exposition of catechetical principles emphasized that catechesis concerns both knowing Christ's Gospel and living that Gospel. The ACRE instruments incorporate both dimensions: Section A pertains to religious knowledge and Sections B, C and D pertain to how students translate that knowledge into religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. Accordingly, Chapter 3 presented the findings concerning knowledge and Chapter 4 presented the findings concerning religious sentiments and behaviors.

This chapter focuses on a few of the stronger findings which lend further cohesion to this study. In particular, it highlights findings pertaining to the associations found between students having strong interpersonal relationships and holding traditional religious values. For example, students who talked regularly with their parents were more likely to affirm their relationship with Christ.

The chapter's findings are based upon a type of statistical computation called cross-classification analysis. Accordingly, the findings are presented in a format which speaks about probable association between two elements, such as the extent to which students talk with their parents and the extent to which those students affirm or reject traditional religious values.

This chapter begins with a brief report on several national studies concerning the impact which feelings of connectedness seem to have on adolescents' academic learning and certain at-risk behaviors. Although these studies were conducted within the academic and medical communities, readers will appreciate their relevance to the current ACRE findings and this NCEA report.

Research on Connectedness

Earlier research findings from within the religious community[1] and more recent reports from the educational[2] and medical fields[3] have increasingly highlighted parent-child and peer relationships as significant predictors of high school students' behavior and academic achievement.

In particular, the cited 1982 NCEA study was based on findings from an earlier version of ACRE assessment instruments, namely REOI and REKAP. Those findings indicated that youths who talked with their parents and family about religious and moral matters were more likely to embrace traditional religious views and to engage in religious activities, including prayer and the sacraments. In addition, they were more likely to disapprove of using drugs, engaging in sexual activity, lying and other immoral behavior.

In 1997, the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health reported findings which support the earlier NCEA findings concerning the importance of this parent-child "connectedness."[4] That medically based study had gathered data from 90,000 youths. Researchers then worked with the responses from over 12,000 American adolescents from grades 7 through 12. The medical researchers found that when adolescents said they felt connected to their parents and their school,

the youths were less likely to smoke marijuana, drink alcohol, use violence and suffer from emotional distress than were other adolescents who said they felt less connected to parents and school. Also, the youths who felt connected had their first sexual experience later than adolescents who did not feel connected.

"Specifically, we find consistent evidence that perceived caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health of young people today," the medical researchers reported.[5]

The study also reported that the physical presence of the parents living with the youth was less important as a predictor than was whether or not the youth felt emotionally connected to the parents. In sum, the medical researchers concluded that emotional contact with parents and schools protected adolescents from risky behaviors.

This finding, drawn from a large population and rooted in medical concerns, reinforces previously reported NCEA findings that the parent-child relationship is a significant predictor of the students' behavior and achievement.

Similarly, the above cited educational study by Laurence Steinberg and others concluded that parents and peers are more critical influences on teenagers' performance in school than are curriculum and teachers[6] The point in citing this study is not in any way to downplay the importance of the curriculum or teacher competencies. Nor is it cited to contrast the relative influences of educators, curricula, peers and parents. Rather, that study is noted simply to affirm that peers and parents do have central influence on educational outcomes, and, by implication, on catechetical outcomes.

Family-Sensitive Catechesis Affirms Connectedness

The Catholic religious educational community, both in theory and practice, has stressed for the last several decades the central importance of the parent-child relationship for the religious formation of youth. Most sacramental preparation programs, for example, now regularly engage parents in helping prepare children for first Eucharist and reconciliation. A similar thrust is evident in many parish preparation programs for confirmation in that they emphasize the youth's relationship with the broader community, with social justice concerns and with the candidate's sponsors.

On the theoretical side as well, Pope John Paul II, in *Familiaris Consortio*, affirmed the family as the "domestic church." The family, he

stated, "in God's plan. . .has been established as an intimate community of life and love...[and] has the mission to become more and more what it is" (#17).

This connectedness is also evident in the three principles of Catholic education: message, community and service. They stress a living connectedness to the person of Christ (kerygma), celebrated communally by disciples within the union of the Eucharistic community (koinonia) and extended to and manifested in missionary outreach to all peoples (diakonia) as noted in *To Teach As Jesus Did.*

In addition, church documents consistently highlighted two major catechetical principles as central to sharing religious values, namely, that catechesis be Trinitarian and Christo-centric. Both principles call believers to share in the intimate, divine life of the Father, Son and Spirit, as well as to become one with the living Christ.

This interpretation of catechetical principles, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships, should come as no surprise to those familiar with the contemporary theology of grace. Theologian Piet Franzen, for example, helped an earlier generation of catechists reinterpret grace less as a spiritual commodity associated with religious indulgences, and more as God's loving and intimate relationship with disciples.[7] This view of divine grace affirms its presence not simply as a shared reality between the individual and God. Rather, such an understanding recognizes grace as divine presence itself, having an effectiveness as it emerges in the loving relationships between members of the believing community. So the person-to-person connectedness which these educational, medical and religious education studies have found to be so beneficial for youth can be recognized as compatible with this theology of grace and with the church's catechetical endeavors.

Religious education leaders familiar with the literature and studies on how families achieve trusting relationships can readily recognize the many parallels with the goals and objectives of catechesis.

Family researchers for the last two decades have consistently found that "normal" families, in contrast to dysfunctional families, share more trusting relationships. One review of this family research literature concluded that psychologists and family system experts see cohesion as more than simply emotional connectedness.[8]

This view of interpersonal cohesion refers to what happens when family members share and co-construct a worldview by means of three skills: configuring their world (having a story), coordinating their ef-

forts (cooperatively empowering the members) and coming to closure (deciding on the behavior). These three skills parallel what the Christian tradition names kerygma, koinonia and diakonia. Because these three skills develop within the parent-child relationship, they offer a framework and a rationale for further exploration of the centrality of the parent-child relationship to the development of the young person's religious values.

ACRE Findings and Parent-child Connectedness

The present study, based on the 1994-95 ACRE data, examined this parent-child relationship from the perspective of three questions focusing on youths' communication patterns with regard to religious beliefs and practices.

Specifically, ACRE asked youths about the extent to which they:

- Talked with parents about serious issues
- Talked at home about God and matters of right/wrong
- Talked with family and friends about problems.

Each of these three communication pattern questions were compared with what youths said about how they:

- Felt toward God and Jesus,
- Morally judged use of alcohol, engaging in lying, and sexual activity,
- Participated in religious behaviors including personal reflection, attending Mass, receiving Eucharist, participation in the sacrament of reconciliation, and devoted time to personal prayer.

This current NCEA study analyzed a considerable volume of data across all three age levels sampled by ACRE 1, 2 and 3. Reported here are a few findings drawn from the ACRE2 student population which are somewhat representative of each of the three age-levels.

Ninth-grade students' responses to ACRE2 indicated that the frequency of communication with their parents did differ depending on the subject matter. A strong majority (80 percent), for example, said they talked with parents and friends about "problems" and most said they talked with parents about "serious issues" (64 percent). But with regard to talking about God and moral questions of right and wrong, the majority (55 percent) of students said they seldom or never talked at home about these matters.

These three questions related to communication patterns were statistically analyzed to learn to what extent the students' frequency of communication with parents was a predictor of the students' self-reports on their moral beliefs, on their relationship to God and on their participation in moral behavior and in traditional religious practices.

The findings indicated that, despite the diversity of the subject matter being discussed by students and parents, a similar pattern surfaced.

Those students who talked with parents about "serious issues," "problems" and about "God" and moral issues of right and wrong were much more likely to report having close relationships with God and Jesus. These students were much more likely to report making traditional moral judgments and engaging in traditionally religious behavior. Conversely, the students who said they did not talk with their parents about these matters were much less likely to report close relationships with God, making moral judgments and engaging in religious behavior.

These key summary findings are based on student responses to three ACRE inventory items which ask the extent to which students talked with parents about these three areas, as indicated in the following charts.

Table 5.1 **Extent students talked with parents about serious matters (ACRE2, item 104)**

Responses	Number	Percent
always	105	25.6
sometimes	158	38.5
seldom	103	25.1
never	44	10.7

A slight majority of ninth grade students, six out of ten (64 percent), said they regularly or sometimes talked with their parents about serious issues. Slightly less than 4 out of 10 (36 percent) said they seldom or never talked with parents about serious issues. Of this later group, one of 4 said they "seldom" talked, and only one of 10 say they "never" talked with parents about serious issues.

Table 5.2 **Extent students talked at home about God and right/wrong (ACRE2, item 108)**

Responses	Number	Percent
always	62	15.2
sometimes	121	29.6
seldom	142	34.7
never	84	20.5

When the subject matter turned to God and matters of right and wrong, only 45 percent say they talk always or sometimes with their parents.

Table 5.3 **Extent students talked with family and friends about problems (ACRE2, item 110)**

Responses	Number	Percent
always	165	40.2
sometimes	163	39.8
seldom	62	15.1
never	20	4.9

In sum, the majority of ninth grade students said they always/regularly or sometimes talked with their parents about serious matters and problems, except for the particular subject matter of "God" and matters of "right and wrong." Across these three questions there is some variation in the extent to which the students said they communicated with their parents.

However, the larger question is: Are there any significant differences in the religious values of these two groups of students, those who talk with parents (and others) and those who do not talk with them?

Cross-classification analysis of the findings indicated the answer is an emphatic yes. The parent/child communication pattern was found to be closely associated with the adolescents' religious values.

The following examples will illustrate this finding for three types of religious values: the students' relationship with God and Jesus, their moral judgments, and their participation in traditional religious activities.

Relationships with Jesus and God. The students' responses to the three parent-child communication statements described above were compared with the students' responses to the two relationship statements, that is, with Jesus and with God.

Students who strongly agreed that their friendship with Jesus helped them (ACRE2, item 62) were three times more likely to say they talked regularly with their parents about serious issues (ACRE2, item 104) than were those who said they never talked with their parents about serious issues (32 percent vs. 8.9 percent).

Similarly, students who strongly agreed that their friendship with Jesus helped them (ACRE2, item 62) were seven times more likely to say they talked regularly with their family and friends about problems (ACRE2, item 110) than were those who said they never did so (45.6 percent vs. 6.3 percent).

Students who strongly agreed that friendship with Jesus helped them (ACRE2, item 62) were twice as likely to say they talked regularly at home about God and matters of right and wrong (ACRE2, item 108) than were those who never did so (21 percent vs. 10.2 percent).

The second relationship question asked the extent to which students agreed with the statement that God paid no attention to them personally (ACRE2, item 53). Again, across all three of the above communication questions, the students who strongly disagreed (and by implication affirmed) that God did pay attention to them were twice to four times as likely to say they regularly talked with their parents about serious issues, God, right and wrong, and about problems.

Moral Judgments. Students' responses to the same three communications-related questions were then compared to their responses to various questions pertaining to their moral judgments. In sum, students who affirmed traditional moral judgments (rejecting sex outside marriage, rejecting lying and the use of alcohol at parties) were much more likely to say they talked regularly with their parents about serious matters, God, moral questions and problems.

For example, students who strongly agreed that sex outside marriage was wrong (ACRE2, item 67) were five times more likely to say they regularly talked with parents about serious issues (ACRE2, item 104).

Similarly, students who strongly agreed that sex outside marriage was wrong (ACRE2, item 67) were almost twice (1.8) as likely to say they regularly talked at home about God and moral issues than were students who said they never did so (ACRE2, item 108).

Comparison with the third communication question indicated that students who strongly agreed with the church's teaching about the wrongness of sex outside marriage (ACRE2, item 67) were almost three (2.9) times more likely to say they regularly talked with parents than were the combined two groups who "seldom" and "never" talked with family and friends (46.1 percent vs. 16.2 percent).

Traditional Religious Behavior. This same pattern appeared with regard to the students' participation in traditional religious activities, including reflection, prayer and reception of the sacraments.

For example, students who said they regularly attended Mass (ACRE2, item 91) were two and a half times more likely to talk regularly with parents about serious issues than were students who said they never talked with parents (ACRE2, item 104).

The same pattern surfaced with this group in response to the other two communication questions. Regular Mass attenders were almost twice as likely to talk regularly "at home" about God and moral matters (22.2 percent vs. 13.6 percent) (ACRE2, item 108). Similarly, the regular Mass attenders were almost seven times more likely to talk regularly with family and friends about problems (40.5 percent vs. 5.9 percent) (ACRE2, item 110).

In sum, these statistical findings indicated that when the parent-child communication patterns were strong, this was found to be associated with the students' having strong religious values, including having a positive relationship with Jesus and with God, with the students affirming traditional moral judgments and with the students engaging in traditional religious behavior. In particular, when the students said that they talked with their family about serious matters, problems, God and matters of right and wrong, these students were more likely to affirm traditional religious sentiments and behaviors.

Conversely, when students said, in effect, that their parent-child communication patterns were weak or non-existent, this was found to be associated with the students saying they did not have strong relationships with Jesus and God, and they rejected traditional moral judgments and religious behavior.

Concluding Comments

The authors' assumption here is that the "talking," by itself, is probably not key. Rather, it is likely that the trusting relationship between the parent and child facilitates the talking and helps the students be more open to the religious sentiments and behaviors described above.

From a theological perspective then, the parent-child relationship can be seen as a manifestation of divine grace. At the same time, these findings indicate how this relationship is integral to and part of the foundation for nurturing the young person's religious sentiments and behaviors.

This same general pattern, here presented for ninth-grade students, was also found, in varying degrees, for the ACRE1 and ACRE3 students. Suffice it for now, however, to call the reader's attention to the following chapter 6. It uses a more powerful statistical tool, factor analysis, and presents findings for all of the items for all three ACRE survey levels.

Chapter 6 will make clear that certain clusters of ACRE items, called factors, predict and are strongly associated with the students' religious knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and perceptions. "Family" or "talk," discussed above, is but one of those predictive factors.

Chapter 6 looks to the bigger picture to consider additional strands and patterns that this study has found to be present in the ACRE students' religious beliefs, perceptions and behaviors.

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1 Andrew D. Thompson, *That They May Know You*, Washington, DC, NCEA, 1982.

2 Laurence Steinberg et al, *Beyond the Classroom*, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1996.

3 JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, 10 Sept. 1997

4 JAMA, ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 *New York Times*, 7 August 1996, p. A15

7 Piet F. Fransen, SJ *Divine Grace and Man*, tr. G. Dupont, New York, 1962.

8 Andrew D. Thompson, "Families staying together", National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Research Digest, 1991, n.1

CHAPTER SIX

Predictors of Religious Knowledge and Religious Practice

This chapter contains the results of a statistical procedure called multiple regression analysis, which is used to identify the important predictors of religious knowledge and religious practice. Six separate multiple regression analyses were performed, three analyses for religious knowledge using the data from ACRE1, ACRE2 and ACRE3, respectively, and three analyses for religious practice. Only data from Catholic students were used in the regression analyses.

The set of predictors for each analysis included the factors identified in Table 2.6 of Chapter 2, with the exception of **student concerns**. Included in the predictor set were the student's gender and whether the student attended a Catholic school or parish-based religious education program. In addition, religious knowledge was included as a predictor in the analyses when religious practice was the dependent variable. Conversely, religious practice was included as a predictor when religious knowledge was the dependent variable. As a result, the predictor set has 13 variables for the data from ACRE1, 18 variables for the data from ACRE2, and 19 variables for the data from ACRE3.

The readers who are knowledgeable about statistics will note the use of a stepwise strategy for the regression analyses. This strategy permits one variable at a time to enter the regression model and only those variables that will significantly add to the prediction of the dependent variable. Furthermore, the stepwise strategy will not permit any variable to remain in the model if its coefficient does not remain statistically significant when other variables enter the model at subsequent steps. Thus, the predictor set that remains after a stepwise strategy contains only variables that have coefficients that are statistically significant.

Results of the Regression Analyses

Table 6.1 shows the results of the six regression analyses. The numbers in the cells of the table are standardized regression coefficients or beta coefficients, which describe the relative strength of the predictors. Only significant coefficients are shown. Cells containing NS (nonsignificant) indicate that the variable represented is part of the predictor set but does not significantly increase the prediction of the dependent variable when in the model. On the other hand, a dash (-) indicates that the variable is not defined for that level of ACRE. The R^2 in the last row of the table indicates the percentage of the dependent variable in that analysis that is explained by the predictors that have entered the model. As evidenced by the pattern of R^2s, better prediction was achieved for religious practice than for religious knowledge.

The results of the regression analyses reveal a slightly different pattern of significant predictors for religious knowledge than for religious practice, with two factors, **relationship with Jesus** and **Catholic identity**, emerging as important predictors of religious knowledge and religious practice for all three levels of ACRE. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on these findings and discusses the other variables that did not achieve significance in the regression analyses. In order to assess the strength of a relationship between two variables, a statistical index called the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, represented by the symbol "r," is used. The range of r is between –1.00 and 1.00, with an r closer to 1.00 indicating a stronger relationship between two variables than an r closer to 0. No linear relationship exists between two variables when r=0. A positive r indicates a direct relationship between the two variables, while a negative r indicates an inverse relationship.

Table 6.1 Standardized (Beta) Regression Coefficients of the Significant Predictors of Religious Knowledge and Religious Practice

	Knowledge			Practice		
Predictors	1	2	3	1	2	3
Program (school or parish)	.319	.347	.209	.054	NS	NS
Religious knowledge	-	-	-	.109	.103	.131
Image of God	.090	-	-	NS	-	-
Distant God Image	-	NS	NS	-	NS	NS
Loving God Image	-	NS	.091	-	NS	NS
Relationship with Jesus	.100	.176	.100	.095	.139	.192
Catholic Identity	.065	.104	.173	.235	.306	.284
Moral	.224	-	-	.088	-	-
Moral: Personal Actions	-	.075	.098	-	NS	NS
Moral: Concerns	-	.059	NS	-	NS	NS
Moral: Gender Equality	-	.143	.167	-	NS	NS
Moral: Sex	-	.094	NS	-	NS	.074
Moral: Drugs	-	NS	-	-	NS	-
Moral: Abortion	-	-	NS	-	-	NS
Family Relationships	NS	-	NS	.266	-	.142
Religious Practice	.135	.131	.194	-	-	-
Social Responsibility	.115	NS	NS	.119	.162	.074
Talking About Issues	-	NS	.136	-	.054	NS
Service	-	NS	NS	-	.146	.082
Parish Perceptions	NS	.059	.144	NS	NS	.090
Religion Teacher Influence	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
School/Program Perceptions	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Gender	.089	NS	NS	NS	.040	NS
Percentage of Variance Explained - R^2	26.1	33.5	24.4	38.8	46.1	51.0

Religious Knowledge and Religious Practice

The relationship between religious knowledge and religious practice is statistically significant for all three levels of ACRE. The relationship is somewhat higher in ACRE2 (r=. 30) than in ACRE1 (r=.26) and ACRE3 (r=.27); however, there is little practical difference between these correlation coefficients. The positive correlation between religious knowl-

edge and religious practice indicates that, in general, as one of these increases so does the other. More knowledge implies higher levels of practice and vice versa.

The regression analysis, which examines the relationship between religious knowledge and religious practice after accounting for the other variables in the model, clearly shows that religious practice is a more important indicator of religious knowledge than knowledge is of practice. This finding illustrates the importance of weekly attendance at Mass, frequent reception of the sacraments and regular prayer in deepening students' knowledge of their faith. Yes, knowledge contributes to increased practice; however, the evidence is clear that practice contributes even more to knowledge.

Program

The highest correlation with religious knowledge in the set of predictors occurs for the program predictor, which represents the difference between the scores of Catholic students in Catholic schools and those in parish religious education programs. The largest difference occurs on ACRE2 (r=.42) and the smallest on ACRE3 (r=.22). The correlation between program and religious knowledge for ACRE1 is r=.35. In each case, students from Catholic schools have higher religious knowledge scores than students from parish-based programs (confer mean scores in Table 2.3 in Chapter 2). This finding is not surprising given that students in Catholic schools receive more programmatic instructional time in religion than do students in parish-based programs. Other factors may also contribute to these differences and their magnitude; however, the data do not permit the assessment of these factors in this study.

On the other hand, the correlation between program and religious practice is substantially lower than that between program and religious knowledge for all three levels of ACRE. In fact, the only significant correlation occurs for ACRE1 (r=.15), which indicates that Catholic school students in the fifth grade have slightly higher levels of religious practice than do their counterparts in parish-based programs. The differences in religious practice between students in Catholic schools and those in parish programs disappears after the fifth grade as indicated by the small, non-significant correlations for ACRE2 (r=.09) and ACRE3 (r=.09).

Students from Catholic schools and those from parish-based programs do not differ on most of the variables used as predictors of

religious knowledge and religious practice. Catholic school students, compared with their counterparts in parish-based programs, do have slightly higher scores in the fifth grade on **Catholic identity** (r=.16) and in the eighth and ninth grades on **relationship with Jesus** (r=.15) and **moral: personal actions** (r=.15). On the other hand, 11th- and 12th-grade students in parish programs have more favorable sentiments toward their parish (r=.21) and their families (r=.13) than do 11th- and 12th-graders in Catholic schools. This latter finding is not unexpected since senior high parish-based religious education programs tend to attract students who are very active in their parishes and have strong family support.

Gender

The correlation of gender with religious knowledge indicates that girls scored higher than boys did in religious knowledge on each level of ACRE. The correlation between gender and religious knowledge increases slightly with age, ACRE1 (r=.14), ACRE2 (r=.16) and ACRE3 (r=.19).

Girls also have more favorable scores than boys on measures of religious practice at all levels of ACRE; however, the correlations generally are less than those with religious knowledge (ACRE1, r=.08; ACRE2, r=.16; ACRE3, r=.15). When other variables are accounted for, however, the relationship of gender with religious knowledge and religious practice weakens considerably, remaining significant only for religious knowledge on ACRE1 and religious practice on ACRE2. In each case, girls have the advantage over the boys.

A number of significant correlations between gender and other variables in the predictor set exist, all showing girls with more favorable beliefs, attitudes and behaviors than boys. These relationships occur at all levels of ACRE and involve beliefs about morality, sentiments toward social responsibility and willingness to talk about important issues with others.

Relationship with Jesus

A student's relationship with Jesus is an important predictor of religious knowledge and religious practice for all levels of ACRE. The regression coefficients in table 6.1 indicate that **relationship with Jesus** contributes significantly to the prediction of both knowledge and practice. Furthermore, the correlations clearly show that **relationship with Jesus**

is a more important predictor of religious practice than of religious knowledge at each grade level. The correlations of **relationship with Jesus** with religious practice are r=.43 for ACRE1, r=.54 for ACRE2 and r=.58 for ACRE3, whereas the correlations with religious knowledge are r=.27 for ACRE1, r=.34 for ACRE2 and r=.25 for ACRE3. Both the regression coefficients and the correlations show that as students get older their relationship with Jesus becomes an increasingly more important indicator of religious practice.

Relationship with Jesus also enjoys significant and relatively high correlations with all other variables in the predictor set. The highest correlations occur for **Catholic identity** (r=.60 for ACRE1, r=.75 for ACRE2 and r=.73 for ACRE3), **image of God** for ACRE1 (r=.57) and **loving God image** for ACRE2 (r=.71) and ACRE3 (r=.71). Thus, a student's relationship with Jesus is a powerful indicator, not only of knowledge and practice, but of his or her sentiments, reported behaviors and actions, and perceptions about God, morality, relationship with family, Catholic identity, social responsibility, parish, school influence and teachers' influence.

Catholic Identity

The **Catholic identity** factor is a very strong predictor of religious practice and a less strong, but significant, predictor of religious knowledge. The **Catholic identity** factor contains elements of religious practice, so the strong relationship with religious practice is anticipated. Recall that this factor generally measures aspects of the Catholic faith that are special to it and not shared with other religions, such as belief in the Real Presence, the significance of the Mass, the importance of Mary, and the sacramental life of the church.

Image of God

A student's image of God, whether in general or as a loving God, is an important predictor of religious knowledge for fifth graders and 11th and 12th graders, but not for eighth and ninth graders. None of the measures of the perception of God's image is an important predictor of religious practice. The image of God measures tend to have a high relationship with **Catholic identity** and **relationship with Jesus**, thereby sharing considerable variance with them. Each of these latter variables also is a strong predictor of knowledge and practice. Thus, after these variables are in the regression model, there is little unique variance remaining in

the image of God measures to contribute significantly to the predictor of knowledge and practice.

Morality

Beliefs about moral issues, overall in ACRE1 and differentiated in terms of personal actions, concerns, gender equality, sexual morality and drugs in ACRE2 and ACRE3, are better predictors of religious knowledge than of religious practice. Belief about moral issues is the second most important predictor of religious knowledge for fifth-grade students. For the older students, beliefs about gender equality and specific moral actions are significant predictors of religious knowledge on both ACRE2 and ACRE 3. Moral concerns and beliefs about sexual morality are important predictors of religious knowledge for the eighth and ninth graders, but not for the 11th and 12th graders. In only two cases does one of the morality beliefs add significantly to the prediction of religious practice. This occurs for the overall measure of moral beliefs in ACRE1 and beliefs about sexual morality in ACRE3.

Family Relationship

A student's reported relationship with her or his family is the most important predictor of religious practice for fifth graders and a significant predictor of religious practice for 11th and 12th graders. The pattern of regression coefficients and correlations indicates that relationship with family played a more critical role in influencing religious practice in younger children than in older children. The factor, as such, is not defined for eighth and ninth graders; however, items from it are included as part of the **social responsibility** factor and the **talking about *issues*** factor on ACRE2.

In the fifth grade, **family relationships** has a strong correlation with many other factors. In addition to its correlation with religious practice (r=.47), **family relationships** has correlations exceeding r=.30 with **parish perceptions** (r=.36), **relationship with Jesus** (r=.34), **school/program perceptions** (r=.32) and **religion teacher influence** (r=.31). The pattern of correlation with other variables shows the importance of family in forming positive relationships with Jesus, parish and school, all of which promote stronger levels of religious practice.

For the 11th and 12th graders, in addition to its strong correlation with religious practice (r=.41), **family relationships** has high correlation with beliefs about sexual morality (r=.35) and Catholic identity

(r=.32). Students in the 11th and 12th grades who indicate strong relationships with their family report more acceptable beliefs about sexual morality and more favorable sentiments toward their Catholic identity than students who indicate weaker relationships with their family.

Finally, **family relationships** shows high correlation with **social responsibility** on both ACRE1 (r=.50) and ACRE3 (r=.32) and with **talking about issues** (r=.40) on ACRE3, supporting the tendency for the items from it to bond with these latter factors on ACRE2.

Social Responsibility

The **social responsibility** factor is an important predictor of religious practice for all levels of ACRE and of religious knowledge for ACRE1. The items in the **social responsibility** factor deal with helping others in need, thinking about rightness and wrongness of actions and sharing with friends and family. Students who report they often practice these behaviors are more likely to participate more regularly in the practice of their religion than are other students.

As evidenced by the pattern of regression coefficients, **social responsibility** is a stronger predictor of religious practice for the students who took ACRE2 than for those who took ACRE1 or ACRE3. The correlation between **social responsibility** and religious practice is also higher for ACRE2 (r=.50) than for ACRE1 (r=.37) or ACRE3 (r=.36). The strength of the **social responsibility** factor for ACRE2 is partly explained by the absence of the **family relationships** factor, which is a strong predictor of religious practice for both ACRE1 and ACRE3.

Talking About Issues

The frequency with which students talk with their parents and friends about religious or moral matters, serious issues or problems is a significant predictor of religious knowledge for those who took ACRE3, but not for those who took ACRE2. The **talking about issues** factor also has a higher correlation with ACRE3 (r=.24) than with ACRE2 (r=.18). The higher correlation for the 11th and 12th graders could be due to the selective nature of the senior high students in parish programs who not only are receiving more religious education but who are likely to enjoy strong family supports, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would be willing to discuss serious issues with their parents. The factor is not defined for ACRE1.

The **talking about issues** factor also is a significant, albeit weak, predictor of religious practice for those who took ACRE2; however, its correlation with practice is substantial (r=.43). The factor is not a significant predictor of practice for those who took ACRE3, despite having a significant correlation with practice (r=.38). The factor's inability to add significantly to the prediction of religious practice for the 11th and 12th graders is likely due to the strength of the **family relationship** factor in predicting religious practice for these students. Recall that for the students who took ACRE2 **family relationship** did not appear as a separate factor and some items from it were part of the **talking about issues** factor, thus improving its chances to be a significant predictor of practice.

Service

The **service** factor deals specifically with issues pertaining to volunteering and serving the church, both in a general way and specifically in terms of a religious vocation. **Service** is a significant predictor of religious practice, but not religious knowledge, for ACRE2 and ACRE3. The factor is not defined for ACRE1.

In addition to its strong correlation with religious practice on ACRE2 (r=.41) and ACRE3 (r=.34), **service** also has substantial correlation with **talking about issues** (r=.46 for ACRE2, r=.44 for ACRE3), **social responsibility** (r=.40 for ACRE2, r=.29 for ACRE3), **Catholic identity** (r=.39 for ACRE2, r=.33 for ACRE3), **religion teacher influence** (r=.32 for ACRE2, r=.28 for ACRE3) and **relationship with Jesus** (r=.31 for ACRE2, r=.25 for ACRE3). While causality cannot be determined solely on the basis of correlation, these relationships certainly point to the important influence of parents, teachers, personal relationship with Jesus and regular religious practice on students' consideration of a religious vocation or providing some service to the church.

Parish Perceptions

A student's perception of her or his parish is an important predictor of religious knowledge for ACRE2 and an important predictor of religious knowledge and religious practice for ACRE3. Interestingly, the correlation between **parish perceptions** and religious knowledge is rather small across all three levels of ACRE (r=.16 for ACRE1, r=.11 for ACRE2 and r=.01 for ACRE3), which normally would indicate little or no relationship between the student's perception of her or his parish and

the student's religious knowledge. However, when the factor enters the regression equation for both ACRE2 and ACRE3, it significantly adds to the prediction of religious knowledge. The factor thus assumes a role as a suppressor variable, a well-known but rather rare occurrence in the statistical literature.

Parish perceptions also has significant correlation with religious practice for ACRE1 (r=.35) and ACRE2 (r=.39); however, it does not appear as a significant predictor in either regression model because of its substantial correlation with other predictors that entered the model prior to it, in particular **Catholic identity** (r=.47 for ACRE1, r=.56 for ACRE2), **relationship with Jesus** (r=.40 for ACRE1, r=.43 for ACRE2), **family relationships** (r=.36 for ACRE1), **talking about issues** (r=.33 for ACRE2), and **social responsibility** (r=.31 for ACRE1, r=.30 for ACRE2).

Religion Teacher Influence

A student's perception of her or his religion teachers does not enter the regression model as a significant predictor of religious knowledge or religious practice. However, **religion teacher influence** does have significant and substantial correlation with religious practice (r=.28 for ACRE1, r=.35 for ACRE2, r=.28 for ACRE3), **Catholic identity** (r=.36 for ACRE1, r=.49 for ACRE2, r=.40 for ACRE3), **parish perceptions** (r=.38 for ACRE1, r=.44 for ACRE2, r=.33 for ACRE3), **relationship with Jesus** (r=.31 for ACRE1, r=.39 for ACRE2, r=.31 for ACRE3), and **loving God image** (r=.42 for ACRE2, r=.31 for ACRE3). These findings indicate that positive feelings about the influence of religion teachers, both in Catholic schools and in parish programs, are associated with more regular religious practice, stronger beliefs about teachings of the Catholic faith, more favorable impressions of the parish, better relationships with Jesus and the tendency to see God as a loving person. Undoubtedly, religion teachers have played an important role in helping students develop these beliefs, behaviors, attitudes and perceptions.

School/Program Perceptions

A student's perception of her or his Catholic school or parish religion program does not enter the regression model as a significant predictor of religious knowledge or religious practice. However, **school/program perceptions** has substantial correlation with each of the other factors in the predictor set. Students who view their school or parish religious

education program in a favorable manner report having better relationships, beliefs that are consistent with Catholic tradition and more favorable attitudes toward parish, teachers and family. Despite not contributing significantly to the prediction of religious practice, **school/program perceptions** does have a significant correlation with practice (r=.34 for ACRE1, r=.33 for ACRE2, r=.34 for ACRE3). On the other hand, the correlation of **school/program perceptions** with religious knowledge at each level of ACRE is substantially lower (r=.12 for ACRE1; r=.18 for ACRE2; r=.09 for ACRE3).

Summary

The following are the principal findings of the regression analyses.

- A strong relationship exists between religious knowledge and religious practice at each grade level. Each variable is an important predictor of the other. Religious practice is a slightly more important predictor of religious knowledge than religious knowledge is of religious practice.
- The factors examined are, on the whole, better predictors of religious practice (45.3 percent of the variance explained on average) than of religious knowledge (28.1 percent of the variance explained on average).
- A student's relationship with Jesus and assessment of his or her Catholic Identity are important predictors of religious knowledge and religious practice for all levels of ACRE.
- The type of program a student attends (parish-based or school-based) is an important predictor of religious knowledge at all levels of ACRE; however, it is an important predictor of religious practice only for ACRE1.
- Social **responsibility** is an important predictor of religious practice at all levels of ACRE, but only for religious knowledge at the fifth grade (ACRE1).
- A student's moral beliefs, either overall or according to specific issues concerning gender equality, sex, personal actions, and concerns, are more important predictors of religious knowledge than of religious practice.
- A student's relationship with his or her family is an important predictor of religious practice, but not of religious knowledge.

- A student's perception of his or his parish is an important predictor of religious knowledge for students taking ACRE2 and ACRE3, but only important for religious practice for students in grades 11 and 12 (ACRE3).
- The following factors do not enter any regression model as significant predictors of either religious knowledge or religious practice: **distant God image**, **moral: drugs**, **moral: abortion**, **religion teacher influence**, and **school/program perceptions**.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Summary and Conclusions

This final chapter reviews the major findings presented throughout the book. The goal is to offer a comprehensive summary that invites pastoral reflection on how the church as a whole can help young members to discover Christ's "seamless garment" of Catholic knowledge, beliefs and practice. Further, we hope youths will choose to weave their own vibrant lives into the fabric of a welcoming church community.

This book is a response to two closely related questions. The first question is pastoral in nature and has been raised by a large population of catechetical leaders, including bishops, diocesan personnel, pastors, parents, textbook publishers, religion teachers and parish program coordinators. This significant population has been continually asking the question: To what extent do our religious education students know their faith and put it into practice? In other words, what do we find out when we assess the students' religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and sentiments and when we ask them how they integrate all these elements of faith into their lives?

In order to assess what the students know and how they integrate it into their lives, many dioceses, schools and parishes use the NCEA's ACRE survey instruments designed for use at three age-appropriate levels. That raises the second question, namely: To what extent is ACRE a reliable and trustworthy tool? This question is more technical in nature and has been raised by a smaller population of statistically oriented individuals. Several Catholic school administrators, parish

program coordinators and NCEA personnel asked for statistical documentation as to the extent to which the ACRE surveys meet the standards and the empirical criteria for educational survey research. Technically stated, they asked: To what extent are the ACRE surveys statistically reliable and valid instruments?

In response to this second question, the statistical findings presented in chapter two have shown that the ACRE instruments not only met, but in most cases, exceeded the standard requirements for statistical reliability. Chapter two explained the methodology the authors used in this research, defined the criteria and then documented to extent to which each component of the ACRE survey instruments met those widely accepted standards. With regard to the validity of the ACRE surveys, the concern was whether the content of the questions which the ACRE surveys asked of the students actually measured the content areas which the surveys purported to measure. Based on a face-value comparison of the ACRE religious knowledge domain items with the definitions of each domain provided in the ACRE manual, the authors concluded ACRE1, ACRE2 and ACRE3 did indeed meet the criteria for face-value content validity. The clusters of questions pertaining to specific themes or domains, for example, those concerning Christ, sacraments or church, did seem to be measuring the students' knowledge of each of the seven knowledge domains.

With the matter of the statistical reliability and validity of the ACRE surveys properly addressed, the findings concerning the pastoral question, what the students knew and practiced as measured by the ACRE instruments, could then be presented and discussed with confidence.

The first chapter explained how two catechetical priorities, assessment and integration, have guided this NCEA research report. These priorities echo Pope John Paul II's description of the purpose of catechesis, namely, nurturing the believer's knowledge of the person and message of Christ so it becomes full and systematic, and bringing the believer's initial faith to maturity. The NCEA's assessment instruments, ACRE1, 2 and 3, were designed specifically with both priorities in mind as they apply to elementary and secondary school children. ACRE assesses the level of the students' religious knowledge and provides some indication of how the students have been integrating this message into their religious beliefs and actions.

In particular, Section A of ACRE assesses the students' religious knowledge in seven content domains, while Sections B, C and D assess

the students' religious beliefs, practices and perceptions. Accordingly, this concluding chapter initially summarizes the major findings from each of these respective Sections, A through D, of the students' religious knowledge, their beliefs, religious sentiments and actions. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the main findings from the factor analysis, which sheds considerable light on how the students are integrating their religious knowledge with their beliefs and actions.

Before getting into a review of the specific findings pertaining to each chapter, a few caveats will further help readers contextualize this report.

The Boundaries and Limits of this Report

1. The purpose of catechesis, as noted in the church's documents cited in Chapter 1, is to nurture the believer's knowledge of the person and message of Christ so it becomes full and systematic and brings the believer's faith to maturity. This purpose is aimed at the faith of adults whereas ACRE has been designed to survey where children are along the path toward maturity.

2. The NCEA ACRE surveys were designed specifically to help catechetical leaders fulfill their responsibility to assess the students' religious knowledge and beliefs and to gain some insight into how students have been incorporating both into their lives. These findings are representative of a national sample, and provide an assessment of over one hundred thousand children. These findings may or may not reflect the progress made in a given local classroom. But these national findings may help local catechists know several key trends to watch for in their respective schools and parishes.

3. The ACRE data here reported accurately represents the religious knowledge, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors of the students surveyed during the 1994-95 school year. So these findings represent only those students and can not be applied to the broader population of religious education students who did not participate in that year's ACRE surveys.

4. Because the data was gathered during the 1994-95 school year, the findings do not reflect improvements which have resulted from doctrinal clarifications and enhancements which religion textbook publishers have made in response to recommendations made by a committee of United States bishops. The publication of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and of the *General Directory for Catechesis*, catechetical leaders report, have provided a clarity which has helped teachers, pastors and parents focus their efforts.

The following paragraphs now summarize the salient findings of this ACRE report.

Significant Findings: Students' Religious Knowledge

With regard to the 7 content areas surveyed by ACRE, the students who responded at each of the three ACRE levels were consistently most knowledgeable in the areas of God, Morality and Sacraments. Readers would do well to briefly review table 3.4, which displays the rankings for ACRE1, 2 and 3.

In particular, by the time students reached the senior high school level, they were scoring, on average, close to 6 correct answers for the 7 questions concerning the Sacraments (mean: 5.97). The students also scored relatively strongly in the areas of Morality (5.52), Worship (5.24) and God (5.16).

Whether or not catechists, pastors and parents will interpret such mean scores as strong does depend on their prior expectations. A score of 6 out of 7 correct, for example, translates to an 85 percent out of a possible 100 percent. This is a score which averages the entire spectrum of respondents, those participating in school and parish programs, those receiving 5 hours of instruction a week and those receiving, at most, one hour a week. Given this spectrum of instruction, then such mean scores of between 5.1 and 5.97 out of a possible 7 for ACRE3 respondents in the domains of God and Sacraments, could readily be interpreted as being toward the strong side of the spectrum.

The junior high 9th-grade students were recording similar high scores for the questions concerning Morality (mean: 5.8), Sacraments (5.75) and God (5.6). For the respondents to ACRE1, the best mean scores were for God (5.45), Scripture (5.41), Morality (5.38) and Sacraments (5.29).

Students' Knowledge of Sacraments

Table 3.4 suggests that with regard to the students' knowledge of Sacraments, this domain's ranking increased from ACRE1's third place, to ACRE2's second place and ended with ACRE3's first place. So what are readers to conclude: are the questions getting easier? Are the students getting more knowledgeable? Because this was not a longitudinal study of the same students over the course of the 8 years from fifth to twelfth grades, we do not have data which speaks directly to the question. However, as table 3.8 indicates, five of the Sacrament questions asked

on ACRE were identical. On average, there was a 12 percent increase in correct answers to the identical question when readers compared student responses between either ACRE1 with ACRE2, or ACRE2 with ACRE3. This suggests that the questions are not getting easier, but rather that the more religious education the students receive, the greater their religious education knowledge.

Students' Knowledge of Scripture

Another question worth noting with regard to the domain rankings indicated in table 3.4 is that the domain of Scripture declines from second place for ACRE1, to fifth place for ACRE2 to 6th place for ACRE3. Readers may well ask what is happening here: Are the older students forgetting what they knew so well in the earlier grades? Quite the contrary. Examination of table 3.9 indicates that there were strong increases which averaged 10 percent for four of the questions which were common to the pairs of ACRE surveys. So this suggests there is no decline in scripture knowledge in the older students. Rather, the decline in ranking seems to be due to a weakness in the students' knowledge of three questions pertaining to the content of the Acts of the Apostles (44 percent correct), the identification of the letter to the Romans as an epistle (58 percent correct), and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard as teaching God's generosity (28 percent correct). So the decline in the ranking for Scripture knowledge seems to be more about what the students are not learning rather than about their forgetting scriptural knowledge learned in their earlier elementary years.

Students' Knowledge of Morality

The area of the students' approach to Morality can often be a lightening rod which attracts adults' attention. So assessment of students' knowledge about the Church's moral teachings is of perennial interest. In general, students' knowledge of Morality is among the highest of the seven domains. There is a slight slip in ranking from the number one position for ACRE2 students, to the number two position for ACRE3 students. So this slight decline in the ranking for the morality domain warrants the reader's attention.

Table 3.10 indicates there were three questions which were found on both ACRE2 and ACRE3. For two of the three, there was a notable increase in the percentage of correct answers:

- Sin, as choosing to do what you know is wrong, showed an increase of 6 percent in correct answers in that the ACRE2 eighth grade students scored 80 percent and the ACRE3 students scored 86 percent.
- Conscience, as the ability to judge right from wrong, showed an increase of nine percent.
- Mature Christians as those who learn their responsibilities and follow their consciences, increased one percent, from 93 to 94 percent.

So the slight decline in ranking of the students' knowledge of Morality from the number one to the number two position, by implication, is not due to students forgetting what was previously known. Rather, ACRE3 students' weak response to two knowledge questions found only on ACRE3 seems to be at the root of the decline:

- The U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace as condemning the nuclear bombing of cities (62 percent correct);
- The existence of universal moral laws that govern the way we act (45 percent correct).

Because neither of these ACRE3 items is found in the ACRE2 survey, no comparison is possible. Therefore there is no evidence in this survey of a decline in religious knowledge pertaining to Morality. Yet, the response to the "universal moral laws" question may be a warning signal for the adult community.

The ACRE3 students' 45 percent response for correctly identifying that there are universal moral laws may raise the question if this is an indication of moral relativism on the part of the majority of students, that there are no moral absolutes, that morality is subjective and determined solely by the individual. One contributing factor is that most students may not be familiar with the term "universal moral laws" and may not recognize that this is a question about moral absolutes and relativism. However, rather than rushing to judgment based on the students' response to this one knowledge item, readers will want to keep this question of relativism in mind as we review the remaining ACRE findings concerning beliefs and the factor analysis of all the information contained in the surveys.

Students' Knowledge of Religious Terminology

This domain remains a challenge. Comparison of the scores in table 3.11, of the ACRE2 and ACRE3 students implies there was some progress evident in the higher percentage of correct answers given by the older students for recognizing the terms: Trinity, covenant and ecumenism. But the percentages remained low for many terms, especially for: evangelists (ACRE3, 41 percent), Paschal mystery (ACRE3, 44 percent), ecumenism (ACRE3, 45 percent), and Incarnation (ACRE3, 51percent).

A very similar poor showing was also evident in the NCEA report on the 1980-81 survey of REOI and REKAP data as well. Although common sense suggests the students' poor recognition of these religious terms is not the most serious issue for today's catechetical leaders and parents, it none the less continues to be a challenge and a clear indication that such religious language is not used or reinforced elsewhere in the students' daily lives. One wonders if this is also indicative of religious values in general, that once the students' step outside the Catholic school or parish religious education program, the students find little which reinforces the values shared in the catechetical setting.

Conclusion with Regard to Religious Knowledge Discussion

The ACRE surveys contained 28 questions whose identical wording allowed comparisons across two or three of the student age groups. For 27 of the 28 questions, the scores of the older students were higher than those of the younger students. If one assumes that the older students have received greater exposure to religious instruction, which seems to be a safe assumption, then this points readers toward the conclusion that students' religious knowledge probably does increase with time. The students seem to be headed in the right direction. Based on these ACRE findings, the Catholic school and parish programs do seem to make a definite contribution. Their knowledge of Sacraments, in particular, is strong. At the same time, the mean scores for several of the knowledge domains are sufficiently modest that there is room for further improvement into their young adult years, especially in the areas of religious terms, scripture and church.

The single item of the 28 knowledge items which allowed comparisons between the age groups, in this case between ACRE2 and ACRE3, for which there was a decline, was the Worship domain item: For Catholics, the Mass is the most important act of worship. Table 3.7 indicates that the decline was 10 percent in correct responses given by

ninth (69 percent) and twelfth grade (59 percent) students. Of itself, this decline is large enough and the question significant enough, that it may command greater attention. This decline reflects the long term trend of adults' declining Mass attendance. So this student response points to a serious challenge for catechetical leaders and the entire adult community. This does not seem to be a matter about getting the children to church. Rather, it raises the question of the role which celebration of the Eucharist plays in the life of the entire adult community.

We now turn our attention to what the students told us with regard to their religious beliefs.

Students' Religious Beliefs, Perceptions and Practices

The paragraphs which follow summarize what students said about their religious beliefs, perceptions and practices. This religious sentiment data seems far richer than that reported concerning the students' religious knowledge. This richness is due, in part, to the fact that the students responded to twice as many statements on beliefs, perceptions and practices (N=113) as they did on knowledge (N=49 or 56). Also, the questions concerning sentiment explore how students are integrating their knowledge and faith into their daily lives. ACRE's sentiment statements address the purpose of catechesis which is to help people come into communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ. Therefore this review of the students' sentiments needs to be approached respectfully, especially as we consider the first two sentiment clusters, the students' images of God and the students' relationship with Christ.

Students' Images of God

The students' responses to the God-image statements present a mixed portrait of God. As the percentage of preferred responses listed in Table 4.1 indicates, the students' overall image of God is quite positive. Eight of every 10 students said they see God as a loving parent, who speaks to them through the bible, and with whom they expect to live in heaven. Importantly, 7 in 10 students said they wanted to learn how to get closer to God. Yet half (51 percent) of the ACRE3 students said they sometimes felt God did not care about them and they believed God was a strict judge (46 percent). Only one in five ACRE3 students seemed to believe that God's love was unconditional in that only 20 percent rejected the notion that if they did "a lot of wrong, God will stop loving" them. So the students' image of God is generally positive, but they also

believe that God's love for them is tentative. From a developmental perspective, it is not unusual to find such ambiguity during the teenage years, even with adolescents in the eleventh and twelfth grades. So with regard to their Images of God, the ACRE3 students have further work to do in developing a religious conviction which affirms that God's love for them is unconditional.

Students' Relationship with Jesus

All three ACRE levels contained six statements which surveyed the students' relationship with Jesus. As noted in table 4.2, a strong majority of the students evidenced not only an openness to Jesus, but a strong bond. Four of every five students said they considered themselves his followers, thought of Jesus as both human and divine, and as their savior and friend. Seven in 10 affirmed that Jesus understood them and that friendship with Jesus really helped them. Student responses to this cluster of beliefs showed a high level of affirmation that the students have a trusting relationship with Jesus.

Student responses to the first two clusters of beliefs, concerning their images of God and their relationship with Jesus, would seem to provide a strong foundation on which the community can build the additional elements of the catechetical message. Review of the following clusters of beliefs illustrate the extent to which this expectation finds fulfillment.

Student's Catholic Identity

The positive findings concerning this cluster of beliefs were that four of every five students said that "Being Catholic is important to me." Also, the majority, three of every four students, affirmed Christ's real presence in the Eucharist and that receiving confirmation was important to them. However, there were also a number of responses of which catechetical leaders should take notice. Six in ten senior high students (63 percent) said they wanted to learn more about their religion, showing a little less enthusiasm than the seven in ten who said they wanted to learn how to be closer to God (72 percent, table 4.1). Student support for the importance of going to Mass, with 63 percent affirming it, was not strong, and there was even less support for celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation (48 percent).

Further, when one compares the younger ACRE1 students' affirmations of these Catholic identity items with those of the ACRE3

students, the older students generally gave slightly weaker affirmations. For a few beliefs, however, the declines are significant. The importance of going to Mass drops 11 percentage points, while Mary's importance drops by 7 and being Catholic by 5 percent. This decline stands in contrast with the students' rather positive affirmations of their relationship to Christ which, as noted in table 4.2, actually increased for three of the relationship statements and declined very little for the remaining 3 of the table's 6 items across the ACRE1 to ACRE3 age span.

This divergence in the level of affirmation between the students' steady beliefs about Jesus and their less steady Catholic identity may represent the beginning of a separation between their relationship with Jesus and their identification with the life of the church. To the extent this is the case, it is a weakening in the fabric of Christ's seamless garment.

Students' Moral Beliefs and Practices

The positive findings concerning moral beliefs were that practically nine of ten students affirmed the equality of persons regardless of gender (table 4.5), and social justice toward all regardless of race and national origin. Four of five affirmed compassion toward poor nations and toward the hungry and those with AIDS (table 4.7).

One moral belief which is a cause for serious concern is that fewer than half of ACRE2 students rejected the statement that it was OK for them to drink alcohol at parties (table 4.6). The ACRE3 students answered a little more responsibly, with more than six in ten saying it was not alright for them to drink alcohol at a party. But for both age groups, the community has a serious problem in that many students are not listening to the Christian message and reject state laws against underage use of alcohol. The consequences of such disbelief are too often tragic.

Similar problems were evident with regard to the students' beliefs about sexual activity. Approximately half the ACRE2 and ACRE3 students rejected the wrongness of sexual intercourse outside marriage (table 4.8). Two-thirds failed to condemn the harm caused by such sexual relations.

Clearly the students' responses to these two clusters of moral beliefs show that the entire Church community has on its hands a very serious challenge to Christ's moral teachings. It is nothing less than ominous. Discussion with catechists, parents, pastors and students is

crucial so all parties can work more closely together to build a stronger framework for further moral catechesis.

Students' Practices Regarding Family

The findings presented in table 4.9 report on six areas of family life and are worth careful consideration. Only one in six ACRE3 students said that at home they regularly talked "about God and right and wrong" and only one in four students said they regularly talked with their "parents about serious issues." So the level of serious discussion in the family does not seem to be frequent . Again, this presents the entire church community with a serious challenge, for the family plays a pivotal role in mediating the church's religious values.

Earlier NCEA research (1982) reported that close family relationships were strongly associated with the students' accepting traditional beliefs and practices. The current NCEA study, working with data from the 1994-95 ACRE surveys, reported in greater detail how this parent-child connectedness seems to be associated with how youths felt about Jesus, with the students' moral judgments and with their religious behaviors.

Although explained at length in chapter 5, a brief summary is that there were major differences found in the religious values of the two groups of students, those who talked with parents and those who did not talk. The "talkers" were more likely to strongly agree that their friendship with Jesus helped them, and sex outside marriage was wrong. Talkers were also more likely to attend Mass regularly.

Conversely, when students indicated their communication patterns with their parents were weak or non-existent, these students were far more likely to say they did not have strong relationships with Jesus, that they rejected traditional moral judgments and they infrequently participated in religious behavior.

Chapter 5 also reported similar findings from the medical profession. Medical researchers working with data from 12,000 adolescents found that when youths said they felt connected to their parents and their school, those youths were less likely to smoke marijuana, drink alcohol and use violence. The youths who said they felt connected had their first sexual experience later than adolescents who felt they were not connected. The medical researchers concluded: "We find consistent evidence that perceived caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health of young people today" [1]. The NCEA

findings extend this conclusion to say that perceived caring and connectedness to others is crucial for understanding the religious health of today's young people.

Educational research reported by Laurence Steinberg[2] and others, discussed in chapter 5, added further weight to the importance of parents' and peers' influence on adolescents. Steinberg concluded that parents and peers are more critical influences on teenagers' performance in school than are curriculum and teachers.

Clearly, parent-child "talking" as such, is not the answer. Rather, it is more likely that it is the trusting relationship which the children feel they have with their parents which provides the solid foundation for the youths' openness to and positive engagement with God, religious knowledge, beliefs and practices.

Students' Religious Practices

Participation in the Eucharist is a primary way youths can, in the words of the *General Directory for Catechesis*, celebrate, live and translate their faith into prayer (#84, p.74). Slightly more than half the ACRE students reported regular attendance at Sunday Eucharist, a figure which is low when compared with the 81 percent of the NCEA REKAP students who in 1980-81 said they attended regularly. Low as these ACRE students' percentages are, they are practically twice the percentage of surveyed adults who reported regular attendance at Mass. The challenge then is not simply found with adolescents, but with the entire adult community.

Attendance at Sunday liturgy is one issue but prayerful participation is another. Three in five of the ACRE1 students said they liked to pray during Mass (table 4.10) and two in five of the ACRE3 students affirmed this practice. These figures seem low, but of themselves give little direction as to the nature of the problem: Do the students know how to pray? Are the liturgies too adult-centered?

Students' participation in prayer in general provides an important perspective on youths' prayer practices. There is some evidence that student prayer, similar to participation in the Eucharist, may also be suffering a decline. Table 4.10 indicates that one in three of all the ACRE students said they spent "some time praying by myself." The earlier 1982 NCEA study found that 53% of the senior high students, responding to the REKAP inventory, said they often or occasionally "pray by myself." The data from these two studies do not seem sufficient to confirm a trend concerning prayer. But they do raise the

question. With such sparse participation in prayer, 32 percent for ACRE3 students, it is no wonder that students reported a desire for becoming closer to God, as noted in table 4.1 which indicated almost 3 of every 4 students said they wanted to learn how to be closer to God. For the ACRE3 respondents, fewer than half seem drawn to pray either in private or during the Eucharistic liturgy.

Students' Concerns

The ACRE2 and ACRE3 surveys contained five statements which invited students to share some of their perceptions with regard to school, friends, violence, drugs and parents. It is difficult to interpret the meaning of their responses because there is no widely accepted scale for determining what the preferred answer should be. In some situations, it is appropriate for the students to worry, but worry should not be an all-pervasive characteristic of the students' lives.

The vast majority of the ACRE2 and ACRE3 students said they worried a lot. ACRE3 students worried about how they were doing in school (85 percent), how their friends treated them (69 percent), about violence (68 percent), drugs (44 percent) and about their parents (69 percent). From a pastoral and catechetical point of view, these worries are opportunities for adults to make contact with the students' world, and to have the students share this part of their lives with adults who may be able to help them address these closely interconnected issues such as violence and how friends are treating them.

Students' Perceptions of Parish and School

In response to requests from many catechists, ACRE was revised in 1992 to include additional items about the students' perceptions of the parish and school, the settings for catechesis. One of the most important findings about the parish was that the majority of students saw the parishioners as caring about helping others in general (71 percent) but less than half saw parishioners as caring about the students in particular (47 percent, table 4.14).

The majority of students, regardless of whether they were in a Catholic school or parish religious education program, said they saw their religion teachers influencing them positively and challenging them to think about their faith (table 4.15). Similarly, seven of every 10 students said they were in a good religion program and that their religion teachers cared about them (table 4.18). However, the students

did not see that caring being shared among their classmates. Only half the ACRE3 students said their classmates cared about one another (tables 4.18 through 4.20). We know from the research cited in chapter 5, that peers make an important contribution to the learning outcomes of students. Religion teachers and parish program directors know that peer relationships are part of the connectedness, part of what catechetical documents call "fellowship" or koinonia. But despite the teacher's caring efforts, these findings indicate a significant challenge stands, namely, to help integrate each of these students not only into a classroom community they perceive as caring, but into a parish community which cares for them as individuals.

A careful reading of these findings does provide evidence that within each student, there is a close-knit fabric of religious beliefs, practices and relationships. The students, like so many works in progress, are attempting to integrate their religious knowledge, beliefs, practices and relationships. Catechists are nurturing this process and cooperating with God's grace to help weave all these elements together into a seamless garment. That garment, Christ's garment, represents the students' integrating their religious knowledge and faith into their daily lives. It also represents the integration of the students into the broader life of the Church, be that the domestic church of the family, the parish community or the universal church, broadly understood. Clearly, we are not there yet, but the data presented thus far suggests that the trusting relationships between the parents and children, and the caring relationships among the parish members, peers and the students, are important contributors for nurturing and integrating all these component parts.

Which Factors Predict Religious Knowledge and Religious Practice?

Chapter 6 of this study reported the findings from a sophisticated statistical tool called multiple regression analysis. It allowed the authors to identify certain patterns within the students' responses to the ACRE survey questions. The patterns pertained to a wide range of variables, centered on the level of the students' religious knowledge and the extent of their religious beliefs and practices. Examples included the extent to which the students participated in the sacraments, whether they had a close relationship with Jesus, their beliefs about equality of persons and the students' gender. Those patterns of responses, here called both

variables and factors, were then compared in order to identify which variables predicted either strong religious knowledge or strong religious practice. The approach which Chapter 6 took to explaining the findings was to describe the contributions which each of 13 factors made to the students' religious knowledge or religious practices. These 13 factors were found to be the ones which made the strongest contributions, that is, which had the highest predictive value of the students' religious knowledge or religious practice. Chapter 6 explained the contribution made by each, starting with religious knowledge, religious practice, program, gender, relationship with Jesus, Catholic identity, image of God, morality, family relationship, social responsibility, talking about issues, service, parish perceptions, religion teacher/catechist influence, and school/program perceptions.

In order to see these findings from a little different perspective than that presented in Chapter 6, the following paragraphs summarize the findings by reporting first on which factors predicted strong religious knowledge and then on which factors predicted strong religious practice.

Predictors of Strong Religious Knowledge

Catechetical leaders have asked the following question: Of the variables found among the ACRE3 students' responses as listed in Table 6.1, which of those 19 predicted when the students would have strong religious knowledge? Statistical analysis indicated that 9 of those variables made some important contribution to whether or not the students were knowledgeable about their faith. In their order of importance, they included the extent of the students':

- instructional training (Catholic school or parish program);
- participation in religious practices;
- affirmation of the importance of Catholic identity;
- affirmation of equality of persons;
- favorable perceptions of the parish;
- talking with parents about serious issues;
- having a relationship with Jesus;
- acting morally.

Each of these factors are integral parts of the students' "seamless garment," such that a strength or weakness in one of the factors, for example, how the students relate to Jesus, parents or parish, contributes

to a corresponding strength or weakness in the students' religious knowledge.

The first and most important factor from this list of predictors of religious knowledge was the nature of the instructional program, that is, whether the student participated in a Catholic school or a parish-based program, whether the student received religious instruction as many as five days a week or once a week. That this would make a difference in the level of the students' knowledge goes without saying and was expected.

However, the contribution of the other factors in the list may invite further reflection and discussion. The students' participation in religious practices (table 2.9) was the second strongest predictor of the students' religious knowledge. This factor included participation in Mass, receiving Eucharist, reconciliation (confession) and prayer. Simply put, the students who participated in these religious practices tended to know more about their faith than those who participated less frequently. Such research findings do establish the existence of a relationship between these two variables but does not affirm nor prove a causality between them. So we can not prove from this research that if students participate in sacraments and prayer, they will be more knowledgeable about their faith. However, catechesis strives to translate the gospel story into life and both knowledge and action are integral to the students' faith. Therefore, for pastoral reasons, we would expect to find that any increase in religious practice would translate into some increase in religious knowledge.

The Catholic Identity variable, statistically speaking, was the third strongest contributor to the students' religious knowledge. For the purposes of this ACRE report, the Catholic Identity factor consisted of eight items including the students' affirmation that being Catholic is important to them, the belief that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, that Mary is important in their lives, as are receiving confirmation, reconciliation and learning more about their religion. The significance here is that when students say their Catholic Identity is important to them, and they want to learn more about their religion, these students seem to translate that sentiment into greater religious knowledge. Readers will recall from chapter 1 that this translation of the Gospel story into the students' lives is central to catechesis. Conversely those students who say Catholic Identity is not important, typically have lesser levels of religious knowledge.

Catechetical leaders, principals, pastors and parents recognize the importance of maintaining a strong sense of Catholic identity within the Catholic school and the parish-based religious education program. This ACRE finding suggests that Catholic Identity, as expressed in these eight items, is integral to developing a higher level of religious knowledge within the students.

In addition to Program, Religious Practice and Catholic Identity, there are another five predictor variables which also make a statistically significant but lesser contribution to predicting the strength of the students' religious knowledge. These predictors are: affirmation of equality of persons, favorable perceptions of the parish, talking with parents about serious issues, having a relationship with Jesus and acting morally.

Readers might ask: Are there other factors or variables, not studied in this report, which also contribute to predicting the students' religious knowledge? Certainly we would expect a number of other factors to come into play, such as the students' general aptitude for learning, the religion teachers' or catechists' level of knowledge and teaching competency, and the quality of the religion textbook series. Those factors, however, important as they may be, were not included in this study because they are not within the scope of the ACRE survey instruments.

Predictors of Strong Religious Practice

Catechetical leaders have also asked the following question: Of the variables found among the ACRE3 students' responses as listed in Table 6.1, which of those 19 variables predicted the extent to which the students would participate strongly in religious practices? (For the list of religious practices confer Table 2.9). Statistical analysis indicated that 7 of those 19 variables made a statistically significant contribution to whether or not the students engaged in religious practices. In their order of statistical importance, the seven variables which contributed to the students' strong religious practice included the extent to which the students:

- affirmed the importance of Catholic identity;
- said they had a relationship with Jesus;
- participated in family-related activities;
- showed strong religious knowledge;
- had favorable perception of their parish;
- affirmed Christian morality regarding sex;
- acted in socially responsible ways toward others.

Comparison of this list of variables which predict religious practice and the list of variables which predict religious knowledge indicates that the two lists are not identical. However, three of the variables appear in both lists, namely whether the students:

- affirmed the importance of Catholic identity;
- said they had a relationship with Jesus;
- had a favorable perception of the parish.

As explained in Chapter 6, the items which make up the Catholic Identity variable do include several religious practices such as participation in the sacraments. Therefore one would expect to find Catholic Identity as one of the predictors of strong religious activity. But Catholic Identity also includes several religious beliefs, such as that Christ is present in the Eucharist, the value of someone entering religious life, and the importance of the Mass, of Mary and of being Catholic. So as with religious knowledge above, the fact that Catholic Identity has significant predictive strength with religious practices is an indication that the students are making some progress in integrating their religious knowledge, beliefs and religious practices. In other words, there is some evidence that the weaving of Christ's seamless garment is taking place.

The second most significant variable which predicted strong religious practice was the students saying they had a relationship with Jesus. As explained in Chapter 5, when the students said they had a strong relationship with Jesus, one that they said made a difference in their lives, this relationship was a clear indicator that the students would be engaged in religious activities. The earlier NCEA report (1982), dealing with individual statements and statistical correlations, also found that how the students related to Jesus was a very strong indicator of traditional religious behavior. The current ACRE report, dealing not with individual items but with clusters of items here called factors, has confirmed the earlier 1982 report's finding and done so in a statistically more convincing manner.

In addition to Catholic Identity and the students' relationship with Jesus, the third strongest predictor was the students' perception of the parish. When that was favorable, the students participated more frequently in religious activities. Conversely, when the perception of the parish was not favorable, the students' participation in religious practices was less.

These first three predictors of religious practices were also found to have predicted religious knowledge. However, both lists also con-

tained one other variable which highlighted the importance of the students' relationship with their family.

Family Relationships was another variable which predicted to extent to which the students' participated in religious activities. This family variable included six items such as having dinner together, talking together about serious issues, and the students doing extra things to make their family life better. For religious knowledge, however, the predictive factor was the extent to which the students said they talked with their parents about matters of right and wrong and about serious issues. So, once again, the data indicates that the students' relationships, with Jesus, with parish or with family members, are among the important predictors of the students' participation in religious practices.

Of the seven variables from the list of predictors of religious practices, the first four have been discussed and the last three are: religious knowledge, affirmation of Christian sexual morality and students' voicing a favorable perception of the parish. The fact that these variables pertain to the realm of knowledge as well as to the realm of beliefs, and that both predict religious behavior, is another indication that the students are making some strides in integration, toward weaving a whole cloth, translating knowledge and beliefs into their lived experience.

Concluding Prayer

A prayer of thanks is due to the more than 100,000 students and hundreds of catechists, Catholic educators and parish program administrators who made the gathering of this data possible. The project came down to an analysis of 6,000 of the ACRE respondents' surveys. But the data is representative of the larger group from which the sample was drawn and of which it is representative. The project, however, continues, in that now it is up to the broader community of Catholic catechetical leaders, both at the diocesan and local levels, to unpack its meaning and apply it to their own school or parish situation.

So, for all that has been, we offer our thanks to God. For all that yet needs to be done, we ask God's grace.

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1 JAMA, 10 September 1997

2 Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom* NY, Simon and Schuster, 1996.

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